



Dutch Education System

Background information

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Department of International Affairs

Dutch Inspectorate of Education

<https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>

List of abbreviations

BAO	basisonderwijs	Mainstream primary education
BBL	beroepsbegeleidende leerweg	Block or day release in vocational education

BOL beroepsopleidende leerweg	Full-time vocational programmes
CITO Centraal instituut voor toetsontwikkeling	National institute for test development
GGD Gemeentelijke of gemeenschappelijke gezondheidsdienst	Municipal health authority
HAVO hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs	General secondary education
HBO hoger beroepsonderwijs	Professional higher education
MBO middelbaar beroepsonderwijs	Vocational education
NVAO Nederlands-Vlaamse accreditatieorganisatie	Dutch-Flemish accreditation organisation
OKE wet wet ontwikkelingskansen door kwaliteit en educatie	Law on developmental opportunities through quality and education
OU open universiteit	Open University
PRO	Practical-pre-vocational secondary education
SBO speciaal basisonderwijs	Special primary education
SICI	Standing International Conference of national and regional Inspectorates of Education
SLO stichting leerplan ontwikkeling	The Dutch institute for curriculum development
SO speciaal onderwijs	Special education
SWV samenwerkingsverbanden	Regional schoolboard alliances
VMBO voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs	Pre-vocational secondary education
VO voortgezet onderwijs	Secondary education
VSO voortgezet speciaal onderwijs	Secondary special education
VVE voor- en vroegschoolse educatie	Early childhood education
VWO voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs	Pre-university education
WEB wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs	The adult and vocational education act
WHW wet op hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek	Law on higher education
WO wetenschappelijk onderwijs	Academic higher education
WOT wet op onderwijstoezicht	The legal basis for the inspectorate
WPO wet op primair onderwijs	Law on primary education
WVO wet op voortgezet onderwijs	Law on secondary education
WEC	Law on expertise centra
Wet passend onderwijs	'Tailored Education act'
Zorgplicht	Duty of care

Description of the Dutch education system

One of the key features of the Dutch education system, guaranteed under article 23 of the constitution, is freedom of education, i.e. the freedom to found schools, to organise the teaching in schools and to determine the principles on which schools are based. Any citizen has the right to found schools and to provide teaching based on religious, ideological or educational beliefs. The constitution guarantees equal public funding for both private and public schools.

'Freedom to organise teaching' means that both public and private schools are free to determine – within legal boundaries - what is taught and how this is taught. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science however, does set quality standards which apply to both public and government-funded private education. These standards prescribe the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets or examination syllabuses and the content of national examinations, the number of teaching periods per year, the qualifications which teachers are required to have, giving parents and pupils a say in school matters, planning and reporting obligations and so on. There is a continuous debate in politics and between the Ministry and the national associations of school boards and/or teachers about details in this balance of freedom and prescriptions.

Public schools are open to all children regardless of religion or conviction and are generally subject to public law. They are governed by schoolboards, which are publicly funded. Public schools provide education on behalf of the state.

Private schools have the right to refuse or to admit pupils whose parents do not respect the belief or ideology on which the school's teaching is based. Though meanwhile respectation the duty of care. The duty of a school (board) to ensure that every child who is registered or enrolled with that school or school board receives education that suits him or her and extra ondersteuning (additional support) if necessary. Privately governed schools are governed by the board of the association or foundation that set them up. The school boards of public and publicly financed private schools appoint their own principals and teachers. Guaranteed in the constitution is also the freedom of choice regarding textbooks. Schools are obliged to organize education in such a way that pupils can achieve the core objectives and reference levels.

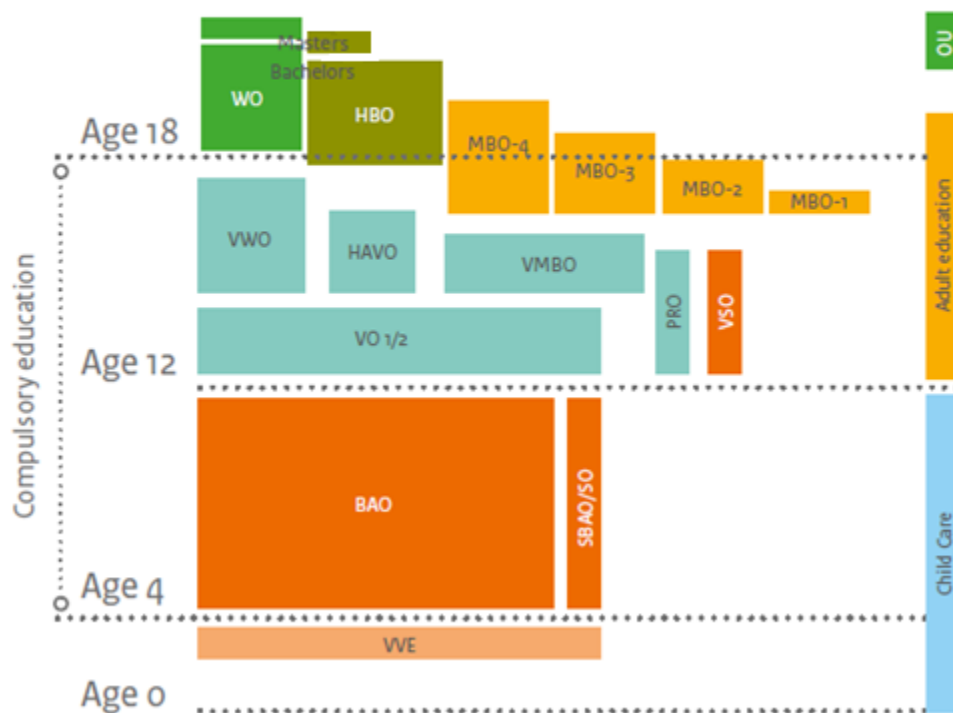
Teaching in private schools is based on religious or ideological beliefs. These include for example Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindustani and anthroposophist beliefs and views.

Some schools base their teaching on specific educational ideas, such as the Montessori, Dalton, Freinet or Jenaplan method. They may be either publicly or privately governed. There are also combinations, e.g. Protestant or Catholic schools with the Jenaplan.

Overview of the Dutch education system

The following scheme gives an illustration of the Dutch education system.

The Dutch education system



Compulsory education

The obligation to attend school is laid down in the Compulsory Education Act 1969. Every child must attend school full-time from the first school day of the month following its fifth birthday. However, parents are allowed to send their child to school before that, at the age of four (98% of the four years olds attend school). Children must attend school full-time for twelve full school years. Since 2007 students who have not obtained a qualification at MBO-2 or HAVO/VWO level, are legally obliged to stay in school until they are eighteen years old.

The Compulsory Education Act is implemented by the municipal authorities.

The municipal executive (at local level) checks that children below school-leaving age who are registered as resident in the area, are enrolled as pupils at an educational establishment and actually attend school.

Primary education

There are limited facilities for children under the age of four. From August 2010 the OKE law is in force for pre- and early education (VVE). This type of education aims to support

children between two and four years old that run the risk of being educationally disadvantaged. This policy has been partially integrated into urban policy and municipal policy on educational disadvantages. The municipalities must, among other things, ensure that these children do have their preschool education. They must also ensure that school boards and preschool organisations make the statutory appointments. The conditions for the kindergarten and preschool are also formulated in the OKE law.

Primary education is spread over eight years/classes. Most children start primary school at the age of four, however compulsory education starts at the age of five. Schools are free to determine the content and methods of teaching, but their work must be based on national attainment targets and reference levels for literacy and numeracy.

National core objectives indicate in general terms the basic minimum that schools are expected to teach their pupils. As the core learning objectives are described in very broad terms, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science developed additional reference levels for literacy and numeracy. Schools have been required to report on their students' performance in relation to the reference levels since 2015. The reference levels provide a general description of knowledge and skills to be achieved, a description of the types of tasks to be mastered, and the criteria that these tasks should meet.

Furthermore, these reference levels are included in the end-of-primary tests which became obligatory since the 2014/2015 school-year.

We focus on stimulating the development of pupils in a broad sense, but we pay specific attention to the basic skills (literacy, numeracy and citizenship education).

Schools have the legal task to promote active citizenship and social cohesion through their education.

As of August 1, 2021, new legal requirements apply for the promotion of citizenship in (special) primary education, secondary education and special education. This legal mandate to promote 'active citizenship and social cohesion' clarifies the 2006 citizenship mandate.

The government does not prescribe how the progress of primary school pupils should be assessed, however it does state that each school should follow the progress of all pupils in primary schools through the use of a mandatory pupil monitoring system

In the school plan (an obligatory document for each individual school), schools describe their ambitions and goals, assessments, evaluations and reporting procedures.

At the end of their eight years of schooling, primary school leavers receive a report describing their level of attainment and potential. To assess the educational potential of their pupils, most schools use the tests for primary school leavers developed by 6 approved providers ([AMN](#), [Diataal](#), [Bureau ICE](#), [CITO](#), [A-Vision](#), [Rijksoverheid](#)). As previously mentioned this test became obligatory since the 2014/2015 school-year. Schools are permitted to choose one test for all pupils from the above mentioned different examination providers, checked annually by the Minister of Education. Based on the capabilities of pupils, teachers give a recommendation on the type of secondary school appropriate for a student, at the end of primary school. This recommendation is decisive for students transfer into different types of secondary schools. Previously pupil's achievement on their end-of-primary test had more weight on the decision for the type of secondary school, however nowadays the outcome of this test can only be used when its score is higher than the recommendation given by a teacher for the type of secondary school.

Secondary education

Upon leaving primary school at the age of twelve approximately, children have a choice – mainly dependent on their potential and capacities - between three major types of secondary education; VMBO (pre-vocational secondary education; four years), HAVO (senior general secondary education: five years) and VWO (pre-university education: six

years). For pupils that are not expected to be able to conclude their education with an examination, practical training is offered for which they may get certificates. These pupils are prepared for a variety of skills which are important to enable them to participate in society.

There are four learning pathways in VMBO:

- basic vocational programme
- middle-management vocational programme
- combined programme
- theoretical programme.

Most secondary schools are combined schools offering several types of secondary education, so pupils can transfer from one type education to another within the same school.

All three types of secondary education start with a period of basic secondary education, during which all pupils study a broad range of subjects which on paper is the same for all types of schools. The actual programme and content matter vary in order to cater for differences in learning abilities. HAVO and VWO pupils study three modern languages, while pupils in VMBO study two. The period of basic secondary education varies in length from one type of school to another, but it lasts at least for two years (as in the case of VMBO) and usually three.

After completing VMBO at the age of about sixteen, pupils can go on to secondary vocational education (MBO). Pupils who have successfully completed the theoretical programme within VMBO can also move on to HAVO which provides access to vocational higher education.

In the second stage of their curriculum, pupils in HAVO and VWO have a choice between four profiles:

- nature and technology
- nature and health
- economy and social studies
- culture and social studies.

A profile is a cohesive educational programme acting as preparation for higher education.

All profiles share a common component. In addition there is a profile component with subjects linked to the chosen profile. And finally, there is room for additional subjects. Pupils can choose subjects from another profile component or take on extra subjects.

Regional schoolboard alliances

The Tailored education act was launched in 2014. An important aim is to improve the realisation of education for every learner with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within the education system. The policy arose from the need and desire to improve care for learners with SEN, to streamline the provisions for special needs education which each had their own funding and procedures, and to prevent learners getting lost between systems. Under this policy, every school board is responsible for providing adequate education for every learner who enrolls, regardless of their specific educational needs or the kind of support they need. By co-operating with other school boards at a regional level, within regional school alliances, schools are required to arrange educational provisions in such a way that every learner can be educated, taking into account their special educational needs. Schools are free to decide on how arrangements are offered.

Some important features of the Education that Fits policy are:

- No learner left behind: school boards are responsible for providing an adequate place in the education system for every learner
- Co-operation between boards of different school types, including primary education, secondary education, vocational education and special education
- Co-operation between schools and other organisations and institutions responsible for children's care and well-being (health organisations, youth care, etc.)
- Participation of all stakeholders (school board, management, teachers and parents).

Provision in mainstream and special schools for special educational needs

The big difference between the situation before 2014 and the current situation is that until 2014, assessment mainly described the learners' disability and, as a result, their incapability. Since 2014, the assessment provides a description of a learner's capabilities, as well as their need for support in order to be successful.

The philosophy of inclusion is also visible in special needs education. In the last two decades, there has been a growing tendency to include more learners with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education. Policy aims to decrease the number of learners with SEN in special schools and increase their inclusion in mainstream schools. The emphasis is on improving the resources for dealing with diversity in mainstream schools, tailor-made support and encouraging co-operation between schools at a regional level.

The quality of special needs education, in both mainstream and special schools, is an important policy ambition. Learners with SEN should have equal chances for further education or a position in society and/or the labour market as their peers without SEN. In 2012, the Act on Quality of (Secondary) Special Education took effect.

Like mainstream schools, (secondary) special education schools have core objectives/attainment targets. These objectives are developed for all the specific groups within (secondary) special education. They give a global curricular description of the education programme for each profile. Schools are responsible for giving form to these global curricular descriptions in the school and in the classrooms.

Secondary special education is built on three profiles connected to learner outcomes:

- Continuous education
- Labour market
- Everyday activities.

In secondary special schools, learners can take examinations. These examinations are the same as in mainstream secondary education. More than 95% of the learners who take examinations pass their final exams; this percentage is higher than the average in mainstream education. Also, learners with SEN in both mainstream and special education have higher marks than their peers in mainstream education.

Parents choose a mainstream school to enrol their child in, based on their preference. The school of application must provide learners who require extra support with the most appropriate schooling. If a school cannot offer the necessary support, the school must find another school that can offer the support needed. To fulfil this obligation, school authorities must offer tailor-made educational solutions within the framework of the school alliances. These solutions can be offered in mainstream or (secondary)

special education. The regional school alliance decides on the budget needed for individual learners, if the schools are not able to arrange the funds themselves.

Schools are obliged to describe the support they offer to learners with SEN every four years in a 'school support profile' (**schoolondersteuningsprofiel**). School development and teacher education in special educational needs are based on these profiles. In the profiles, schools not only describe what support they can offer learners with SEN, but also the regular support they offer for learners with dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and gifted learners. The document sets future aims as well: the profile the school would like to grow into and what is necessary to achieve this.

After admission, schools are obliged to provide an individual development plan for every learner who receives extra support. The plan describes the expected outcomes and educational objectives for that learner. It indicates the level the learner can achieve and the support they will need to achieve it. The parents are to agree with the development plan, if agreement cannot be found the parent can state their opinion. The plan is twice yearly evaluated and, if necessary, adjusted.

Learners with mild learning disadvantages can (temporarily) attend 'mainstream-plus' schools in primary education. These schools have smaller classes, so learners receive more guidance. Mainstream-plus learners complete the mainstream curriculum and take the compulsory test when they are in the highest class. After completion, most learners transfer to mainstream secondary education; a smaller number transfer to secondary special education.

In secondary education, two types of mainstream schools offer extra support. Regional schoolboard alliances receive extra funding for learners with mild learning disadvantages. They can allocate this to schools at the pre-vocational secondary education level (VMBO), in order to provide smaller classes and/or extra assistance in class. Practical training schools specialise in learners with a learning disadvantage and lower IQ. Learners attain a certificate at the end and can then transfer to upper-secondary vocational education level 1 (assistant worker).

Upper-secondary vocational education consists only of mainstream schools. They provide additional support individually.

Special schools

The introduction of the Education that Fits policy in 2014 allowed the regional schoolboard alliances to follow own assessment procedures (instead of a nationwide procedure), to agree upon an admissibility declaration for special education. Specific requirements are legally set out to assure the declaration of admission is based on objective criteria and standards.

Although inclusive education in mainstream schools is promoted and encouraged, special schools are sometimes in a position to offer the best support. Parents' preference for special schools must also be respected. There are roughly four types of children with SEN who can attend special schools:

- Children with visual impairment or multiple disabilities, including visual impairment
- Children with hearing impairment or communication disorders (due to hearing, language or speech difficulties or autism), or children with multiple disabilities including hearing, language or speech impairment
- Children with physical and/or intellectual impairments and children with a chronic physical illness, such as epilepsy
- Children with mental or behavioural disorders.

When learners are admitted to a special school, a personal development plan is written. It describes the expected outcomes and educational objectives for that learner. It indicates the level the learner can achieve and the support they will need to achieve it. The parents must agree with the development plan.

Special schools also have smaller classes, more specialised staff and more specialised tools for instruction.

Young children aged 0–7 with severe development disadvantages, due to intellectual, physical or social problems, can attend a medical day-care facility. Parents are eligible for reimbursement for this facility. The medical support team creates an individual development plan for the child and also supports the parents.

Adult and Secondary Vocational Education

The Adult and Vocational Education Act (WEB), which came into force on the 1st of January 1996, covers two types of education: secondary vocational education (MBO) and adult education.

Vocational Education focusses on three goals:

1. Training students for a specific profession
2. Preparing students for further education
3. Developing students towards good citizenship

MBO comprises school bound vocational training (BOL) and block or apprenticeship programmes with work components (BBL).

BOL is full-time (fte) with a course programme of 1.600 hours study load per year, of which approximately 1000 hours a year of guided education time under the responsibility of and practised by the educational establishment and vocational training at the company. For each of the training levels specific requirements apply for the distribution of the hours per year, on the basis of legislation. Within BBL, the focus is on practical training. BBL can be compared to apprenticeship based training and takes mainly place in the company where the student is employed.

Besides a BOL or BBL programme, students also have the possibility to follow a third pathway. This third pathway can only be offered in the form of a private-non-funded vocational training by institutions and here no standards for the amount of teaching hours required apply.

MBO courses are offered in four subject fields (economics, technology, agriculture and personal and social/healthcare) which can be divided in 16 domains. The courses can be taken at four different qualification levels:

- assistant worker (entrance level/ level 1);
- basic vocational training (level 2);
- professional training (level 3);
- middle management or specialist training (level 4).

There are over 700 courses/programs in several levels. Almost 500.000 students are in a VET-program in the Netherlands. The programs are described in mandatory blueprints, called *Qualification Documents*. The blueprints contain requirements and guidelines towards the schools. It is up to them to elaborate the content of the programs, which allows them to take the regional dynamics into account and to adapt their programs.

Adult education comprises adult general secondary education (VAVO) and adult basic education. VAVO is regarded as 'second chance education' (VMBO-theoretical programme, HAVO and VWO). Adult basic education is focused on acquiring language and mathematic skills. Furthermore also basic ICT skills are comprised herein.

The following courses are offered:

- Dutch language and mathematic courses focusing on literacy and the starting level of vocational education;
- 'Dutch as a second language' courses which are aimed at mastering the Dutch language at a basic level;
- 'Dutch as a second language' courses focusing on literacy.

Higher education

The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education, which means there are two types of programmes: research-oriented education (wetenschappelijk onderwijs, WO), traditionally offered by research universities, and professional higher education (hoger beroepsonderwijs, HBO), traditionally offered by hogescholen, or universities of professional education. The distinction between WO and HBO types of higher education is important in the Dutch higher education system, and determines the admission requirements, content and length of degree programmes, as well as the degrees awarded. All higher education institutions may offer both types of programmes, but in most cases research-oriented programmes are offered by research universities and professionally-oriented programmes are offered by universities of professional education. Since 2002, the higher education system in the Netherlands has been based on a three-cycle degree system, consisting of a bachelor, master and PhD.

At the ages of around 17 and 18 respectively, HAVO certificate-holders and VWO certificate-holders can opt to move on to higher education. HAVO is designed to prepare pupils for higher professional education (HBO). In practice, however, many HAVO school-leavers also go on to the upper two years of VWO and to secondary vocational education. VWO is designed to prepare pupils for university. In practice, many VWO certificate-holders enter HBO. MBO level 4 certificate-holders can go on to higher professional education, while HBO graduates may also go on to university.