

The Education System in the Netherlands

As a result of the Bologna process, the higher education system in the Netherlands is based on a three-cycle degree system, consisting of a bachelor, master and PhD.

Two types of programmes are offered in higher education: research-oriented degree programmes offered primarily by research universities, and professional higher education programmes offered primarily by universities of applied sciences.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Children are allowed to begin school at the age of four, but are not legally required to do so until the age of five. Primary education lasts eight years (of which seven are compulsory), in the last year of which pupils are advised as to the type of secondary education they should pursue.

Secondary education, which begins at the age of 12 and is compulsory until the age of 16, is offered at several levels. *VMBO* programmes (four years) combine general and vocational education, after which pupils can continue in senior secondary vocational education and training (*MBO*) lasting one to four years. The two programmes of general education that grant admission to higher education are *HAVO* (five years) and *VWO* (six years). Pupils are enrolled according to their ability, and although *VWO* is more rigorous, both *HAVO* and *VWO* can be characterized as selective types of secondary education. Only the *VWO* diploma grants access to research universities, and the *HAVO* diploma is the minimum requirement for access to universities of applied sciences. The last two years of *HAVO* and the last three years of *VWO* are referred to as the *tweede fase* (literally, second phase), or upper secondary education. During these years, pupils focus on one of four subject clusters (*profielen*), each of which emphasizes a certain field of study in addition to satisfying general education requirements. Each cluster is designed to prepare pupils for programmes of study at the tertiary level. A pupil enrolled in *VWO* or *HAVO* can choose from the following subject clusters:

- 1) Science and Technology (*Natuur en Techniek*)
- 2) Science and Health (*Natuur en Gezondheid*)
- 3) Economics and Society (*Economie en Maatschappij*)
- 4) Culture and Society (*Cultuur en Maatschappij*)

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institution: research universities and universities of applied sciences. Research universities include general universities, universities specializing in engineering and agriculture, and the Open University. Universities of applied sciences include general institutions as well as institutions specializing in a specific field such as agriculture, fine and performing arts, or teacher training. Whereas research universities are primarily responsible for offering research-oriented programmes, universities of applied sciences are primarily responsible for offering programmes of higher professional education, which prepare students for particular professions. These tend to be more practically oriented than programmes offered by research universities.

The higher education system also includes a third branch, with a relatively small number of students, known as international education. International education offers advanced training courses originally designed for people from developing countries whose jobs require highly specialized knowledge. Problem-oriented courses and programmes of various types, including master's programmes, are offered in a wide range of specific fields.

The higher education system in the Netherlands is a binary system, with a distinction between research-oriented programmes and professional higher education. As a result of the Bologna process, the system is organized around a three-cycle degree system awarding bachelor, master and PhD degrees. Degree programmes and periods of study are quantified in terms of the ECTS credit system.

The focus of degree programmes determines both the number of credits required to complete the programme and the degree which is awarded. A research-oriented bachelor's programme requires the completion of 180 credits (3 years) and graduates obtain the degree Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science (BA/BSc), depending on the discipline. A bachelor's degree awarded in the applied arts and sciences requires the completion of 240 credits (4 years), and graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Bachelor of Engineering, B Eng, or Bachelor of Nursing, B Nursing).

A research-oriented master's programme requires the completion of 60, 90, or 120 credits (1, 1.5, or 2 years). In engineering, agriculture, and math and the natural sciences, 120 credits are always required. Graduates obtain the degree of Master of Arts or Master of Science (MA/MSc). A master's degree awarded in the applied arts and sciences requires the completion of 60 to 120 credits and graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Master of Architecture, M Arch).

The third cycle of higher education, leading to the PhD, is offered only by research universities. The major requirement is completion of a dissertation based on original research that is publicly defended. All research universities award the PhD. In addition to the doctorate, the three engineering universities offer (technological) designer programmes consisting of advanced study and a personal design assignment in a number of engineering fields. The technological designer programme requires two years of study to complete and graduates obtain the degree "Professional Doctorate in Engineering (PDEng)".

Requirements for Access to Higher Education

For access to research-oriented bachelor's programmes, students are required to have a *VWO* diploma or to have completed the first year (60 credits) of a bachelor's programme at a university of applied sciences. The minimum access requirement to universities of applied sciences is either a *HAVO* diploma or a diploma of secondary vocational education (*MBO* diploma), provided certain conditions are met. The *VWO* diploma also grants access to universities of applied sciences. For access to both types of higher education, pupils are required to have completed at least one of the subject clusters that fulfils the requirements for the higher education programme in question. A quota, or *numerus fixus*, applies for access to certain programmes, primarily in the medical sciences, and places are allocated using a weighted lottery. Potential students older than 21 years of age who do not possess one of the qualifications mentioned above can qualify for access to higher education on the basis of an entrance examination and assessment. For access to certain programmes, particularly those in the fine arts, students have to demonstrate the required artistic abilities.

The only access requirement for the Open University is that applicants be at least 18 years of age.

For access to all master's programmes, a bachelor's degree in one or more specified disciplines is required, in some cases in combination with other requirements. Graduates with a bachelor's degree in the applied arts and sciences may have to complete additional requirements for access to a research-oriented master's degree programme.

Credit System and Grading

A student's workload is measured in ECTS credits. According to Dutch law, one credit represents 28 hours of work and 60 credits represents one year of full-time study. The grading system used in the Netherlands is on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (outstanding). The lowest passing grade is 6; 9s are

seldom given and 10s are extremely rare and grades 1-3 are hardly ever used. The academic year is 42 weeks long.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

A guaranteed standard of higher education is maintained through a national system of legal regulation and quality assurance, in the form of accreditation. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for legislation pertaining to education and the agriculture and public health ministries play an important role in monitoring the content of study programmes in their respective fields.

Quality assurance is carried out through a system of accreditation, administered by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (*NVAO*). According to the Dutch Higher Education Act, all degree programmes offered by research universities and universities of applied sciences must be evaluated according to established criteria, and programmes that meet those criteria are accredited: i.e. recognized for a period of six years. Only accredited programmes are eligible for government funding, and students receive financial aid and graduate with a recognized degree only when enrolled in, or after having completed, an accredited degree programme. Accredited programmes are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (*CROHO*).

Besides the accreditation of degree programmes, the Netherlands has a system by which the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recognizes higher education institutions by conferring on them the status of either “funded” or “approved”. “Funded” indicates that the institution is fully financed by the government. “Approved” indicates that the institution does not receive funds from the government and has to rely on its own sources of funding. Whether a degree programme is offered by a ‘funded’ or an ‘approved’ institution, it must be accredited and registered in *CROHO* to be considered recognized.

National Qualifications Framework

An important outcome of the Bologna process is the development of a “Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area”. This overarching framework provides a general and common structure for qualifications awarded in countries signatory to the Bologna Declaration, and offers recommendations and guidelines for the development of mutually understandable qualifications frameworks at national levels. By the year 2010, all countries in the European Higher Education Area should have a national qualifications framework in place that complies with the goals and criteria of the European framework while describing the specific elements of each individual system.

The Netherlands is currently in the process of establishing a national qualifications framework. Many of the elements of the framework are already in place and have been mentioned earlier in this description: the three-cycle system of degrees is firmly imbedded in the higher education system, most degree programmes are described in terms of internationally-compatible learning outcomes and the Higher Education Act clearly indicates access requirements for each cycle of education, the required number of ECTS, the distinction between research-oriented and professionally-oriented programmes and the names of the degrees awarded. Furthermore, the Netherlands has a well-established system of quality assurance. Because of the experience of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (*NVAO*) in evaluating educational programmes in terms of learning outcomes and competencies, this organisation will play a vital role in adapting national qualifications to the requirements of the overarching framework. The Netherlands is well on its way in developing a national qualifications framework that complies with the European framework, and expects to complete this process by 2010.