

Education in the Netherlands

From private to public

Since the foundation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, the government has been responsible for ensuring that all Dutch children receive a decent education. Not that it has a monopoly of schools or the right to dictate what is taught in them. Under the 1848 Constitution, any group of people may set up a school based on religious or philosophical beliefs or educational principles.

Freedom of education

The government is of course responsible for supervising the educational system. It is compulsory for children in the Netherlands to attend school full-time from the age of five and to attend school part-time between the ages of 16 and 18. The subjects taught in all types of school are laid down by law, as are attainment targets. This enables the government to ensure that qualifications are uniform throughout the country.

Schools set up by public authorities — usually municipalities— are called public-authority schools. All other schools, founded by private bodies, are called private schools. Though more than three-quarters of the schools in the Netherlands are private, they are all eligible for government funding, provided they meet the criteria.

Teachers too are paid by the government. In **2001**, the Netherlands spent 5.3% of its GDP on education. Education is free of charge for children. All parents, irrespective of income, receive child benefit. -

Basic grant

Students aged 18 or older have to pay for their education. Fees for most higher education courses are the same. All students aged 18 or older receive a basic state grant, which they may supplement with a loan. The amount of the loan will depend on the student's income (or that of his/her parents). The student's progress also plays a role. Students aged 18 or older can also apply for a season ticket entitling them to reductions on public transport. **19.2%** of all 18 to 27-year-olds are currently receiving some form of higher education fulltime. Few Dutch schools, colleges or universities provide accommodation for their students, and there are no dress codes or school uniforms.

Primary education

Primary schools in the Netherlands cater for children aged 4 to 12. The eight-year primary school curriculum focuses on pupils' emotional, intellectual and creative development along with the acquisition of essential social, cultural and physical skills. Every primary school draws up its own school work plan on the basis of conditions specified by the government. Special schools cater for children with a learning, physical or social disability, providing them with an education and giving them extra care.

Secondary education

Children from the age of 12 are eligible for admission to secondary education, of which there are three types:

- pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO);
- senior general secondary education (HAVO);
- pre-university education (VWO).

Most secondary schools provide more than one of these types of education. VMBO takes four years and leads on to secondary vocational education (MBO). HAVO is a five-year programme and leads on to higher professional education (HBO). VWO takes six years and leads on to university (WO). Pupils in the first two to three years of secondary school are all taught the same core curriculum, consisting of 15 subjects. 95.7% of all 17-year-olds in the Netherlands have currently either completed or are still attending secondary school full-time.

Vocational education

The Adult and Vocational Education Act (WEB) of 1996 established regional training centres offering a complete range of adult and vocational education courses. All vocational courses combine work with study. There are two types: vocational training with a practical component of no less than 20% and no more than 60%, and day release schemes with a practical component of at least 60%. Courses are provided at four levels. The regional training centres also provide adult education.

Higher education

Higher education comprises higher professional (HBO) and university education (WO). A bachelor-master degree structure was introduced in 2002. Bachelor's degree courses take three years at university and four years in higher professional education. Graduates with a bachelor's degree can go on to do a master's degree. Master's degree courses take between one and two years, depending on the subject. But it takes three years to get a master's degree in medicine.

Once students have graduated, they may specialise or carry out research. The Netherlands has nine general universities, three technological universities and one agricultural university, all with specialised research institutes.

Adult education

Adult education encompasses most of the types of education described above. Adults may attend part-time or full-time courses, during the day or in the evening. The Open University, with its wide variety of programmes, plays a special part in adult education.

International education

For children receiving part of their primary or secondary education abroad (for instance because their parents work abroad), there are schools where the whole curriculum is taught in English, French or German and culminates in an international baccalaureate certificate. The Netherlands also has ten institutes of higher education offering specialist programmes to foreign postgraduate students in English and occasionally in French or Spanish.