

# Overview of the Dutch secondary education system

***This information sheet provides basic information about the Dutch secondary education system. Children start their school career when they are four years old, schooling is compulsory until the age of 16. After that, part time schooling is compulsory until the age of 18. Schools can differ by their denomination (public, Catholic or Protestant) or specific educational ideas (Dalton, Montessori, Freinet, Rudolf Steiner or Jena Plan). Within the system there are different tracks towards higher education.***

There are 666 high schools – public and private - in The Netherlands. In 2006 940.450 students attend one of the various types of secondary education. For comparison: the US has 50.000 high schools and about 16 million students in secondary education.

All Dutch schools - public and private - are financed by the national government. Private schools receive extra contributions from the parents. Private schools can be Catholic, Protestant or based on a certain type of philosophy. Children with special educational needs attend a special school. Public schools are governed by the municipal council (or a governing committee) or by a public legal entity or foundation set up by the council. Private schools are governed by the board of the association or foundation that set them up. Public education is open to every student, therefore public schools are not allowed to select students. The private schools – however – can reject students if their parents do not subscribe to the belief or ideology on which the school's teaching is based. The Netherlands has 190 public schools and there are 476 private schools. About 30 percent of the students attend a public school.

## **Dutch schools and religion**

In the Dutch educational system *private schools* do not actually differ from *public schools*. A *private school* is merely a school

administered by an independent school board, as opposed to a local government authority, and is based on a denomination or a specific educational philosophy. At the same time it is, as is a *public school*, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and its Inspection who guard the curriculum and the quality of education in both primary and secondary schools. Approximately 60% of all secondary schools are private schools. This policy, which was agreed upon in 1917 - when a new Amendment (Article 23) was added to the Dutch Constitution, resulted from a long historical conflict in which religious and secular parties fought over religious education and reached a rather elaborate and unique compromise. Religious parties wanted their schools to receive financing equal to that received by public schools while maintaining their freedom in for example curriculum policy and teacher appointments, whereas the liberals tried to protect the privileged financial position of public schools. In the new agreement all parties concerned agreed a.o. to equate private and public education financially. Since 1917 all primary and secondary schools in The Netherlands have therefore been government funded. Later secularization, which left its mark in The Netherlands, meant a definite loss of religious influence on a.o. schools; it has made them independent of religious organizations. Most people now feel that if a school belongs to anyone, it belongs to parents.

Many Dutch schools with a denomination are therefore a heritage from the time that The Netherlands was strongly divided in a so called pillar system, a time when Catholics and Protestants lived separate lives: Catholics read the catholic newspaper, went to catholic schools and catholic sports clubs and the same for Protestants.

All private (religious) schools can offer the opportunity for students to study world religions as well as practise the religion of their denomination, but this is not compulsory. Nowadays most private schools only offer selective courses, which are often courses in world religions or religious orientation.

In principle a private school could refuse the admission of a student if the parents indicate disagreement with the school's denomination or educational philosophy, which is a very uncommon occurrence. Practically secondary schools cannot select students on the basis of religion, nor of ethnicity or class. Children can go to any school they want independent of their religious background. In Article 23 in the Dutch constitutional law it is stated that there is freedom of education. For this reason schools with a Christian denomination in The Netherlands nowadays attract students from all kinds of backgrounds, Christian as well as non-Christian. Religious symbols and activities are not forbidden but do not at all have a dominant role in contemporary Dutch education.

### **Finance**

Secondary schools are directly or indirectly government funded, but parents will be requested to pay for extras. Schools receive a fixed amount per pupil together with a fixed amount per school. The school receives about € 5.600 (\$ 7.200) per student. Non-public schools request from the parents an extra contribution of usually €100 (\$128) per year per student. Public schools are not allowed to ask for extra funding, but often parents do contribute voluntarily.

Schools can also have extra income from the municipal council, interest on capital, contract activities and sponsoring. Schools situated in a lower income area with many non-native speakers and low educated families receive extra funding. The extra budget has to be spent on extra language and other training to prevent children from getting behind compared to children who don't have a language problem.

Because of the way schools are funded the government has a relatively big influence on the educational system. All students are being prepared for a comprehensive exam that gives them access to higher education. This is a national exam that takes place on the same time and date throughout The Netherlands every year in May. The national government is responsible for 2/3 of the curriculum, quality standards and for quality control. Schools may determine the remaining 1/3 of the curriculum by offering special courses such as Latin, religious education, mother tongue teaching, private education or pre-vocational subjects.

### **Tracks**

There are three tracks of education each aimed at a different academic level. After primary school, students can pursue pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) which is usually an introduction to middle vocational education (MBO). VMBO takes four years to complete and students must choose one of four sectors: engineering and technology, economics, agriculture, and care and welfare.

Senior general secondary education (HAVO) lasts five years and qualifies students to enter higher professional education (HBO). Some students also choose to enter in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of pre-university secondary education VWO or start MBO education. The MBO is comparable with community colleges and is depending on the field of study two to four years, still, it is considered as secondary education.

Pre-university education (VWO) lasts six years and prepares students for academic

studies at university level (WO), but some students also decide to enter HBO. VWO includes Gymnasium (Latin and Greek is compulsory), Atheneum (Latin or Greek is compulsory), Lyceum (Latin and Greek are optional). Both HAVO and VWO students must choose from four so-called education profiles: science and technology, science and health care, economics and society, and culture and society.

Students may also combine science and technology/science and healthcare or economics and society/culture and society. All secondary schools must teach a compulsory core curriculum of subjects including Dutch and foreign languages (including English), sciences and biology, mathematics, geography, history, physical education and the arts for several years before allowing students to bridge off into their respective study paths.

Courses of study in vocational education have been adjusted to better suit the labor market. In light of the ever-growing demand for MBO and HBO graduates, an important goal is to encourage students to move on to higher secondary school levels.

From the third grade to the final grade 121.980 students are in VMBO, 91.380 students are in HAVO and 109.860 students are in VWO and Gymnasium.

### **Tests**

During the school career there are two moments that tests are taken, these tests are compulsory for all students.

In the final year of primary education all students have to do a test (CITO-toets). The CITO is comparable with SAT but adjusted to the age group. The test is supposed to give a qualification of the student's score. The advice of the teacher continues to play an important role. The result of the test determines whether the student continues at the VMBO-level, HAVO, VWO or Gymnasium levels. Most schools that offer HAVO and VWO teach students together in the first two years. After those two years, depending on the academic results, students continue at

HAVO-level or VWO. Gymnasia are often independent schools and offer Greek and Latin which is compulsory for the first four years.

In the last year of secondary education students have to do a comprehensive exam. They can only enter higher education if they pass this so-called Central Exam.

### **Calendar**

The academic calendar runs for 40 weeks; from the middle or end of August til the beginning or half July (depending on where the school is located). The summer break is six weeks. There is a one week break in October, a two week break around Christmas, and two single week breaks in spring.

### **Teachers**

All teachers in secondary education must be certified. Teachers need to have a degree of the School of Education which is a four year training at HBO-level. To teach at senior level, a Master's degree in the field of teaching and an extra training of teaching are required. For several years there has been a shortage of teachers. Recently, there have been experiments to attract employees from other sectors such as corporate businesses as teachers. The results from those experiments are relatively successful, although a shortage of teachers remains.

### **Trends**

More and more schools implement bilingual education and programs that lead to the International Baccalaureate Exam. This means that quite a few schools offer full programs in English. Only students with higher grades or extra motivation are accepted in these classes. Coordinators of these so called bilingual departments are often very much involved with internationalization of their schools, especially with English speaking countries. International projects are more and more common in Dutch schools. Many schools run European projects in which they also get the chance to visit each others country.

More and more teachers are interested in visiting countries beyond Europe, such as China and the United States. About 10% of the pupils will visit a foreign country in an international exchange.

### **Differences between Dutch and American education**

There are important differences between Dutch and American secondary education are various. There is a big difference in finance structure, since all schools – public and private - in The Netherlands receive funding by the government. A university prep school (gymnasium) is just as expensive as a prevocational school (VMBO). Furthermore tracking in high school, testing and cultural differences are a few of the main differences.

#### Finances

Private sponsoring in Dutch education is almost non-existent. There is a strongly held belief that sponsoring from companies should not interfere in schools. The government is the main sponsor and is therefore very influential on school administration and curriculum.

#### Tracking

Students are being tracked when they are 12 years old and finish primary school. According to their academic results they choose for prevocational education or education that prepares the students for higher education (professional or academic).

#### Tests

Another big difference is that once they passed for their exam on a VWO-school or Gymnasium, they are admitted into any Dutch university they want. The same counts for a HAVO degree that gives students entrance to any university of professional education. Only art and music schools have a selection procedure. Studies like medicine and dentistry have 'numerus fixus'. Also, study fields as criminology and psychology have become so popular recently, universities have implemented a

numerus fixus system in those fields as well. Since a few years The Netherlands established a few American type Liberal Arts & Sciences academies, affiliated with the universities and are aimed at gifted or highly motivated and talented students. These academies also attract many international students.

#### Cultural

In The Netherlands the high school is not the center of a teenagers life. Usually students are finished with school between 2.30 pm and 4.00 pm to go to a sports club, music lessons, cultural association or they simply go home. Extracurricular activities are mainly funded by the city council and not by the school. In the USA many extra curricular activities take place at the school. In The Netherlands those activities are organized by independent organizations.

#### Other differences

There are less variations of education in The Netherlands. Single sex education is non-existent in The Netherlands. Home schooling is not legal unless a student is extremely ill and therefore not able to come to school and there is only one boarding school in The Netherlands.

#### **More information:**

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

<http://www.minocw.nl/english/index.html>

Education Council (Independent governmental advisory body)

[http://www.onderwijsraad.nl/english/information\\_about\\_the\\_education\\_council](http://www.onderwijsraad.nl/english/information_about_the_education_council)

European Platform (governmental body that supports international exchange)

[http://www.europeesplatform.nl/index.php?var\\_content=content&contentid=4](http://www.europeesplatform.nl/index.php?var_content=content&contentid=4)

Fulbright Center

[www.fulbright.nl](http://www.fulbright.nl)

Setting up an exchange

<http://www.fulbright.nl/?menutree=5|1|4|200>

Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_the\\_Netherlands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_Netherlands)

Study in The Netherlands (NUFFIC)

<http://www.studyin.nl>

