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Key features of the Dutch Education System

- 8 years of primary education (age 4 – 12)
- compulsory education: starts age 5, ends age 18
- selection at age 12
- highly diversified lower secondary education
- two out of six streams lead to higher education
- four out of six streams lead to upper vocational education
- several routes through system

Young people between 5 and 18 years have to follow education. Until they have a basic qualification or turn 18 years old. For pupils between 5 and 16 years the Compulsory Education Act applies. In the Netherlands, pupils must attend school from 5 to 16 years old. However, in fact, nearly all children attend primary school from the age of four.

Organisation and Governance

- Overall responsibility for the education system lies with the State, specifically the [Minister of Education, Culture and Science](#) ^[1] and the State Secretary (junior minister) for Education, Culture and Science.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science lays down statutory requirements for early childhood education, primary and secondary education and secondary vocational education, and has overall control of adult general secondary education (VAVO).
- The Minister of Education sets the framework (in law and other rules) in which individual schools should perform. There is no national curriculum, but there are attainment targets in general education.
- The government lays down the framework within which higher education institutions (higher professional education and universities) have to operate, but it is the responsibility of the competent authority of each institution to expand on the government framework in the teaching and examination regulations.
- The provincial authorities' role in education is limited to supervisory and legal tasks. The administration and management of schools in primary and secondary education and schools for secondary vocational education is locally organised.
- The schoolboard is responsible for the school and for the quality of education, including meeting the attainment targets.
- The Dutch system is on the one hand highly centralised and other the hand highly de-centralised.

Freedom of education

Guiding principle in educational governance is article 23 of the Constitution:

1. Education shall be the constant concern of the Government;
2. All persons shall be free to provide education, without prejudice to the authorities' right of supervision.

People have the right to found schools and to provide teaching based on religious, ideological or educational beliefs. As a result there are both publicly run and privately run schools in the Netherlands.

Stages of the Education System

The Dutch education system consists of different educational levels:

Childcare/ early childhood education (ISCED 0) [2]

Prior to primary school, children from 6-8 weeks to 4 years can stay at a kindergarten. Playgrounds are meant for children from 2 to 4 years old.

In addition, there is early childhood education, focussed on children from 2,5 till 5 years old who are at risk of an educational disadvantage.

The municipalities are responsible for maintaining of the quality of the playgrounds.

Primary education (ISCED 1) [3]

Primary education covers:

- mainstream primary education (BAO)
- special schools for primary education (SBAO)*
- special schools catering for both the primary age group (SO and VSO)*.
- please also see the information on special education.

Mainstream primary education lasts 8 years and is for all children aged 4-5 to 12. All children must make an attainment test in group 8 of primary school. In group 8 the primary school gives an advice on which secondary school which fits the level of the child. Therefore, the school examines inter alia the learning achievements, creation and development on the primary school.

Advice on secondary education

Since 2015, the advice on secondary education prevails for the placement of pupils in secondary education. The school in secondary education has to place the child minimum at the level that the primary school advices. In some cases, the child does not have to make the compulsory attainment test. For example, if the child has learning or behavioural difficulties or has multiple disabilities.

Secondary education (ISCED 2 and 3) [4]

Secondary education encompasses schools providing:

- Pre-vocational secondary education ([VMBO](#) [5], duration of 4 years)
- Senior general secondary education ([HAVO](#) [6], duration of 5 years)
- Pre-university education ([VWO](#) [7], duration of 6 years)

VMBO comprises four learning pathways:

1. the basic vocational programme (BL),
2. the middle-management vocational programme (KL),
3. the combined programme (GL) and

4. the theoretical programme (TL).

These pathways lead on to MBO programmes. After completing a combined or theoretical programme, students may also go on to HAVO.

HAVO and VWO courses prepare students for tertiary education programmes/higher education.

Special education and Practical Training (ISCED 2) [8]

Special education covers different forms of education:

- Special education/ special secondary education
- Special schools for primary education
- Practical education

Next to mainstream primary education and secondary education, there are schools for [special primary education](#) [9] and school for special (secondary) education. These schools are meant for pupils who need orthopedagogical and ortho-didactical support.

For pupils who have not obtained their diploma on VMBO, nor with long extra help, there is practical training. This special form of education prepares pupils for a place on the labour market. Special primary education is meant for all children who need orthopedagogical or ortho-didactical help. They attend a special school for primary education.

Vocational education (ISCED 2 and 3) [4]

The Adult and Vocational Education Act (WEB, introduced in January 1, 1996) arranges secondary vocational education (MBO) and the adult education.

A student in vocational education (MBO-student) can choose between:

- school-based vocational training ([BOL](#) [10])
- block or day-release programmes ([BBL](#) [11])

BOL can be taken either full-time or part-time. Within BBL, the focus is on practical training, which takes up 60 per cent or more of the course. MBO courses can be taken at four different qualification levels:

1. Assistant level (level 1)
2. Basic vocational training (level 2)
3. Professional training (level 3)
4. Middle-management or specialist training (level 4)

Adult Education [12]

Adult education covers a variety of courses and training programmes in the following subjects:

- Adult general secondary education ([VAVO](#) [13]);
- Dutch language and arithmetic, aimed at basic literacy and the starting level for vocational education;
- Dutch as a second language (NT2) I and II, leading to the qualification in Dutch as a second language, as referred to in the Decree on State Examinations in Dutch as a Second Language;
- Dutch as a second language, aimed at basic proficiency in the Dutch language;
- Dutch as a second language, aimed at basic literacy.

Higher education (ISCED 6/7/8) [14]

Bachelor, master and Associate degree are levels. These are international recognised titles that graduates can use if they have completed a study programme at an institution for higher education or university.

- A Bachelor degree programme can be followed at an institution for higher education or at an university.
- The two-year Associate degree programme can be followed at an institution for higher education.
- A Master degree programme is often followed at an university. However, institutions for higher education also offer master programmes.

- Associate Degree (2 years)

An Associate Degree is:

- a two-year study in an hbo-programme (university for applied sciences).
- part of an bachelor degree programme at an institution for higher education.
- The level is between vocational education level 4 (mbo-4) and a hbo-bachelor (bachelor degree at an higher university for applied sciences).

Especially students in vocational education (level 4) and people with a number of years of work experience can increase their chances on the labour market with an Associate Degree. Graduates can move on directly to a hbo-bachelor programme (university for applied sciences) which is linked to the Associate Degree.

- University of Applied Sciences (HBO: 4 years)

HBO institutions (also known as universities of applied sciences or hogescholen) provide higher professional education. They contribute to the development of those occupations to which their teaching is geared and conduct design and development activities and research related to specific occupations. A total of 37 hogescholen currently receive central government funding. The Ministry of Economic Affairs is responsible for funding three of these, which provide agricultural and environmental education.

- Universities/ academic level (3 years & master = min. 1 year)

(Research) Universities focus on academic teaching and research. The national government funds 18 research universities. These include the Open University for distance learning, four theological or humanist universities, three universities of technology, and Wageningen University. The latter is funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

Education inspectorate

The [Inspectorate of Education](#) [15] oversees:

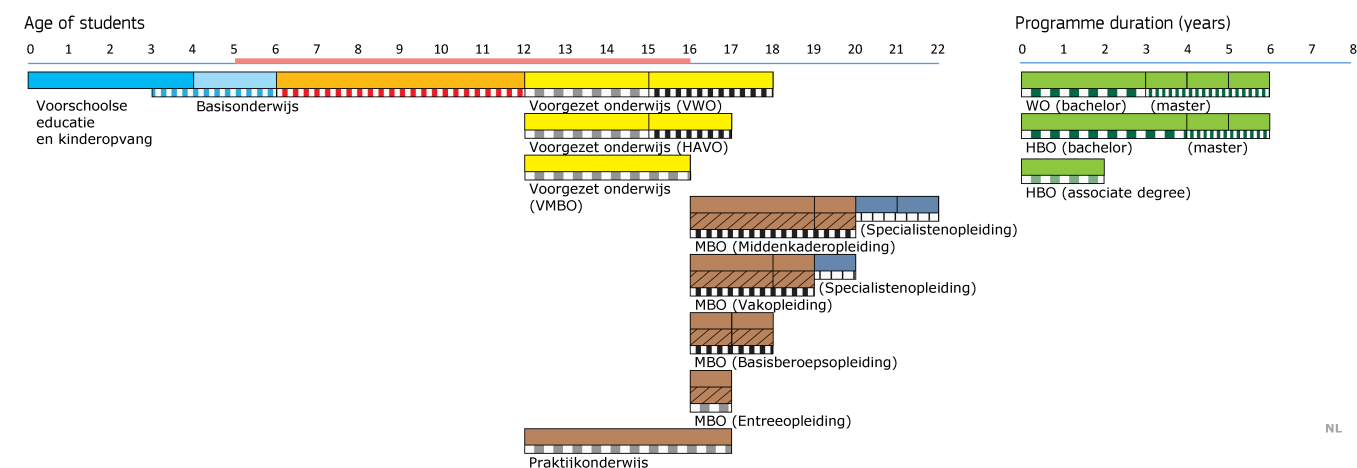
1. The quality of education
2. Adherence to educational laws
3. Proper spending of funds (legitimacy and functionality)

The Inspectorate uses a system of risk-analysis to decide which schools should be inspected and which schools may be trusted to deliver good quality education.

In addition, the Inspectorate monitors the (financial) health of boards in the hbo and monitors the (accreditation) system of higher education.

Structure of the National Education System

Netherlands – 2020/21



Note: At 16, students who have not obtained a basic qualification (*Startkwalificatie*) have to continue their education/training until they turn 18 or get a senior general secondary (HAVO) or pre-university (VWO) or VET (at least MBO 2) diploma.

Source: Eurydice 2020/21

For further information, please consult the introduction articles of [Organisation and Governance](#) and [16] of each educational level: [Early Childhood Education and care](#) [17], [Primary Education](#) [18], [Secondary and Post Secondary Non Tertiary Education](#) [19], [Higher Education](#) [20] and [Adult Education and Training](#) [21].

For a brief description of other main topics regarding the national education system, please read the introduction article of [Funding in education](#) [22], [Teachers and education staff](#) [23], [Management and other educational staff](#) [24], [Educational support and guidance](#) [25], [Quality assurance](#) [26], [Mobility and internationalisation](#) [27].

For information on recently adopted or planned reforms and policy measures, please consult topic [Ongoing Reforms and Policy Developments](#) [28].

While Eurydice provides comprehensive and comparable information, further information may also be found on the website of the [Ministry of Education, Culture and Science](#) [29].

Common European Reference Tools Provided by the Eurydice Network

- [National Student Fee and Support Systems](#) [30]
- [Organisation of the Academic Year in Higher Education](#) [31]
- [Organisation of School Time in Europe](#) [32] (Primary and general secondary education)
- [Recommended Annual Instruction Time in Full-Time Compulsory Education in Europe](#) [33] (Presented by grades/stages for full time compulsory education as well as by subject and country.)
- [Teachers and School Heads Salaries and Allowances in Europe](#) [34] (Salaries and allowances of teachers and school heads at pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education levels.)

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Links

- [1] <https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-education-culture-and-science>
- [2] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care
- [3] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Primary_Education
- [4] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Secondary_and_Post-Secondary_Non-Tertiary_Education
- [5] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#VMBO>
- [6] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#HAVO>
- [7] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#VWO>
- [8] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Separate_Special_Education_Needs_Provision_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education
- [9] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#Special_primary_education
- [10] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#BOL>
- [11] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#BBL>
- [12] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Adult_Education_and_Training
- [13] <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Glossary#VAVO>
- [14] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Higher_Education
- [15] <https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>
- [16] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Organisation_and_Governance
- [17] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care
- [18] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Primary_Education
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- [28] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Netherlands:Ongoing_Reforms_and_Policy_Developments
- [29] <http://www.government.nl/ministries/ocw>
- [30] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-student-fee-and-support-systems-european-higher-education-%E2%80%93-201718_en
- [31] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-academic-year-europe-%E2%80%93-201819_en

[32]

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-school-time-europe-primary-and-general-secondary-education-%E2%80%93-201819_en

[33]

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[34]

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/teachers-and-school-heads-salaries-and-allowances-europe-201617_en