

Strategic agenda for higher education and research
Fit for the future

AMBITION ↗



TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

More accessible higher education and greater student success

PLANS

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Closer alignment with the labour market and society

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More cooperation for better synergy and less competition

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More flexible higher education

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Regional bedrock and international cooperation

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More cooperation for better synergy and less competition

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

- The burden of work on lecturers and researchers is growing. The volume of work involved in submitting and assessing research applications is high, while rising student numbers are also causing higher teaching loads. The research culture tends to be dominant at universities.
- There is a risk of research and teaching becoming less closely interwoven, certainly in disciplines with large student numbers.
- It is a challenge for the Netherlands to retain its competitive position as a knowledge economy in a globalising world in which some countries have made sizeable investments in education and research.
- There is generally too little cooperation and sometimes even fierce competition between institutions.

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More cooperation will lead to greater synergy, less unnecessary competition and a better balance between teaching and research. This will reduce pressure within the higher education and research system.

PLANS

- In 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will explore how the variable component of the budget, based on student numbers, can be reduced in order to prevent institutions competing for students.
- As of 2020, €60 million in public funding currently competitive through NWO will be channelled directly to the universities in order to provide more stability for researchers and to reduce the burden of work involved in submitting and assessing research applications. The universities are working with the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) on a proposal to increase this sum to €100 million in the future.
- Institutions are now working together in sector plans, setting out specialisms and focus areas. This should help prevent duplication and reduce the burden of work involved in submitting and assessing research applications. They will move forward with these plans in the future.
- To reduce pressure on individual lecturers, institutions are taking action to recognise the value of teaching, in addition to research, and are encouraging staff to work together in teams. The Ministry supports this action, including at EU level.
- In late 2019, NWO, KNAW and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) will announce further measures to reduce the burden of work on university staff, particularly in relation to research applications.





More accessible higher education and greater student success

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

- Access to higher education is generally good. Yet a third of students drop out or switch courses. This applies in particular to 'first generation' students, male students and students with a disability.
- Higher education needs to be more accessible to cater for the greater disparities between students with different educational backgrounds.
- Students are generally satisfied but feel under pressure to perform.
- The binary system – with universities and institutions of higher professional education existing side by side – ensures a variety of options, but is too rigid to enable forms of cooperation that would benefit students.

AMBITION

To safeguard access to higher education, extra efforts are needed to ensure that each student is in the right place, that there is attention for their personal circumstances, that they get maximum benefit from their education and can develop fully as individuals (student success).

PLANS

- Access to higher education begins at an earlier stage. Extra funds have been earmarked for regional agreements to improve the transition between secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education.
- Extra attention is also needed for adequate information provision and educational guidance to prevent students dropping out in their first year. Studies – e.g. by the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO) – will support this.
- The basis on which institutions select students for courses needs to be critically reviewed. Matching rather than selection is the preferred option.
- 'Universities of applied sciences' and research universities are going to work more closely together with the aim of getting students into the right place faster and more easily, and keeping them there. Better, joint information provision and a smoother switch between higher professional and university education are needed.
- 'Universities of applied sciences' and research universities are increasingly focusing on student welfare and inclusion. Funds for peer guidance – 'students-4-students' – will be extended.
- The Ministry will work with institutions to set up an Expertise Group on the Accessibility of Higher Education to enable exchange of knowledge and best practices with a view to improving accessibility.





More flexible higher education

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

- The emergence of new technologies calls for new knowledge and skills. But it also presents opportunities to improve teaching and research.
- There is too little educational provision for people in work. The Netherlands lags behind other countries in this respect.
- New technologies like artificial intelligence, increased computational power, big data, open badges, microcredentials, blockchain, and virtual & augmented reality present many opportunities for institutions of higher education to improve the quality of education.

AMBITION

More flexible, customised higher education will meet the needs of a diverse student population including working adults and benefit some of the young people coming from secondary education too. Digitalisation in particular presents many opportunities for this.

PLANS

- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will work with institutions to set up pilot projects with more flexible courses. Where possible, the principles underpinning flexible education will be laid down in law.
- Providing courses for working adults is one of the public responsibilities of state-funded institutions. The Ministry will ensure that this responsibility is enshrined in law.
- Flexible, modular education will be introduced. That is vital for working people, so that they can balance their studies with the demands of their jobs and private life. The Ministry will explore the extent to which this will require adjustments to the funding system.
- Institutions will work on more flexibility and more effective use of digitalisation through the Acceleration Plan for Innovation in Education with IT. The Ministry will provide financial support and promote scaling-up by providing legislative clarity and scope. The Acceleration Plan addresses eight themes, including 'Higher education data' as part of which experts are working on a national code for ethics and privacy issues.





Closer alignment with the labour market and society

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

- Dutch students are highly skilled and graduates are currently well-prepared for the world of work. However, the labour market is highly dynamic, and jobs and tasks are constantly changing.
- Some courses do not prepare students adequately for the labour market. In other disciplines, there are too few students to meet labour market demand.
- The changing labour market calls for more adaptive higher education provision, geared to a wide range of skills.

AMBITION

To continue meeting the needs of both society and the labour market, institutions together need to work on innovation in education provision, in cooperation with the world of work. A changing labour market calls for a focus on a wide range of skills in addition to up to date professional knowledge.

PLANS

- In order to ensure that courses and/or related disciplines in Dutch higher education are more closely aligned with labour market demand and social objectives, institutions will continue their strategic cooperation on the basis of the sector plans. They will also involve the world of work and other stakeholders.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will explore how this cooperation can be factored more explicitly into macro-efficiency policy.
- To promote alignment with the labour market, institutions should focus on innovating and adapting existing courses. The Ministry will identify where there is scope for this (in terms of both regulations and quality assurance).
- The Association of Universities of Applied Sciences will draft a joint plan for professional master's degrees, with a view to ensuring a good range of high-quality courses that meets the needs of the labour market and society and forms an alternative to existing courses.
- Graduates with a wide range of skills can more easily meet the changing expectations of society and the labour market. Institutions and the Ministry will explore where a wide range of skills is already part of courses' exit qualifications, and identify best practices. Studies will be conducted to support these activities.





Regional bedrock and international cooperation

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

- Urban regions are a major factor for innovation and economic growth. 'Universities of applied sciences' and research universities play a key role in regional knowledge infrastructures and help regions to acquire a distinct profile. The interwovenness of teaching and research promotes circulation of knowledge.
- At the same time, teaching and research are becoming less closely interwoven, and applied research at institutions of higher professional education is still limited in scope.
- To remain competitive, cooperation is essential at national, international and, in particular, European level.
- The Netherlands has an open, high-quality research system that scores well at European level.

AMBITION

Through more cooperation, including at European level, and more pooling of strengths, higher education institutions can contribute to the community and economy of the region where they are located, and compete with global frontrunners in teaching and research. 'Universities of applied sciences' will be given the opportunity to take their applied research to the next level.

PLANS

- To boost the regional knowledge ecosystems, universities of applied sciences are expanding their applied research activities and their Centres of Expertise. They will put forward a proposal for a separate third cycle in higher professional education, leading to a distinct title, for example a professional doctorate.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will take an active part in the City Deal project that seeks knowledge-based solutions to urban challenges.
- To keep up with the global frontrunners, universities, institutions of higher professional education and civil society are now working more closely together in the field of research, including with partners across the EU.
- Given developments in relation to security and open access and with a view to raising Dutch higher education's international profile, the Ministry will work with stakeholders to draw up a strategic knowledge policy.

