

Strategic agenda for higher education and research

Fit for the future

Summary

Higher education and research in the Netherlands are of good quality. Dutch research universities rank among the best in the world. Our universities of applied sciences occupy an important position in regional knowledge ecosystems, while several are very highly regarded internationally. Participation in higher education has grown sharply in the past decades, quality has improved and student satisfaction has increased. Graduates are generally well-prepared for the labour market. Further development of the binary system – universities of applied sciences and research universities alongside each other – and of applied research presents many new opportunities.

At the same time, there are some urgent problems. The funding system for higher education, largely based on student numbers, has proved to be a strong incentive to attract as many students as possible. Research is fraught by competition, and so many research grant applications are submitted that only a small proportion can be approved. This competition for funding puts an especially great burden, in terms of workload and work pressure, on university staff. Growth in research funding is not keeping pace with the increase in funding for education, which threatens to make teaching and research less closely interwoven. Finally, given that other countries are making considerable extra investments in higher education, we will need to make an effort to maintain our international position as a competitive knowledge economy.

More cooperation

To relieve the pressure on the higher education and research system and to maintain our internationally competitive position, institutions and government authorities will need to enhance cooperation and cut down on unnecessary competition in the period ahead. This will mean reducing incentives to compete. And institutions will have to decide – in consultation with each other – in which areas of research they want to stand out, and in which they want to work together.

To boost cooperation, the government recently decided to make the system for funding higher education more stable by reducing the size of the variable component, based on student numbers, and increasing the fixed component. This has made it less interesting for institutions to compete for students. In late 2020, we will decide whether further changes are needed to the ratio between the variable and fixed components of the budget. As of 2020, €60 million in public funding currently disbursed indirectly will be channelled directly to the universities in order to provide more security for researchers and to reduce the growing volume of work involved in submitting and assessing research applications. The research 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 years to come.

Institutions are already working together, setting out their specialisms and focuses by discipline in sector plans. They will move forward with these plans in the future. The National Science Agenda also encourages cooperation. In late 2019, NWO, KNAW and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) will announce further measures to reduce the burden of work involved in applying for and assessing research applications.

For individual lecturers and researchers, it is important that teaching should be regarded as highly as research, and that working in teams is stimulated, to relieve the pressure on the individual. To achieve this, the universities have set out a highly promising strategy. From 2020, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science will introduce two prestigious education awards for teams of teachers at universities of applied sciences and research universities who have carried out successful education innovation projects. This education prize, focusing on excellence in teaching, will be the equivalent of the Spinoza and Stevin research prizes for research universities and the Delta prize for applied research at universities of applied sciences.

Set against the background of more cooperation, this agenda sets out four ambitions for the coming years.

1. More accessible higher education and greater student success

Our ambition is to improve accessibility and increase every student's chances of success. Each student's success depends on different factors, and these must be taken into account. The aim is for students to enter higher education in the right place, or to get there as soon as possible, to develop fully and to complete their education successfully.

Measures include the following.

- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is working with higher education institutions to set up an Expertise Group on the Accessibility of Higher Education that will help ensure that both practice and policy are based on the latest insights.
- In order to ensure that each student finds the right place as soon as possible, higher education institutions are working more closely together at regional level. The aims are to improve educational guidance, enable a smoother transfer from universities of applied sciences to research universities and vice versa and introduce more flexible learning pathways.

2. Flexible higher education

The aim for the next four years is that more institutions will be providing flexible courses of study, responding rapidly and adequately to the needs of various groups of students, including working adults. The number and ratio of working adults in higher education will have increased substantially. Digitalisation presents many opportunities to achieve this. Measures include the following.

- Universities of applied sciences and research universities will have created sufficient provisions to accommodate those combining education with a career. Lifelong learning calls for different forms of teaching. It will therefore be possible for students to study in stages, take time out, or do fast-track courses. Flexible, modular courses lower the threshold for students and promote accessibility.
- Working with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is fostering demand for lifelong learning, for example with grants from the newly introduced scheme to improve career prospects (STAP), and an online overview of schooling options.

3. Closer alignment with the labour market and society

Society and the labour market are changing rapidly and it is crucial for higher education to keep up with that pace. It is increasingly important to have transversal skills in addition to more specific skills and knowledge. This calls for higher education institutions to continually innovate in education provision, through collaboration with each other and dialogue with stakeholders. In four years' time, we will have achieved a better balance between the needs of society and institutions' response to them. Measures include the following.

- Continual attention is needed to ensure that study programmes or related disciplines in Dutch higher education meet labour market demand and social objectives. We will increase our focus on strategic cooperation through sector plans or sectoral fact-finding. The sector plans set out coherent priorities for both teaching and research, and involve the labour market and other stakeholders.
- In order to ensure adequate provision of master's degree programmes by universities of applied sciences, it is important to meet the needs of both the labour market and society and to provide an alternative to existing provision. The Association of Universities of Applied Sciences will draft a joint plan for a high-quality provision leading to a professional master's degree.

4. Regional bedrock and international cooperation

Increasingly, higher education institutions are the bedrock of regional knowledge ecosystems. The ambition for the next four years is to strengthen and build on this position. Measures include the following:

- To boost the regional knowledge ecosystems, universities of applied sciences are expanding their applied research activities and their Centres of Expertise. At the invitation of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the institutions will put forward a proposal for a separate third cycle in universities of applied sciences, leading to a distinct title, for example a professional doctorate.

Often, regional cooperation is also essential in order to play a leading international role. Dutch higher education and research currently perform at elite global level. We are committed to maintaining and, where possible, reinforcing this position. Given the activity in the US and Asia, it is increasingly important to join forces at European level. Measures include the following:

- To keep up with the global frontrunners, research universities, universities of applied sciences and civil society are now working more closely together in the field of research, including with partners across the EU.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will work with relevant stakeholders to draw up strategic knowledge policy aimed at raising Dutch higher education's international profile.

In the next few years, progress with this strategic agenda will be discussed on a with universities of applied sciences, research universities and other stakeholders. We will also address problems, new opportunities and good examples. In addition, the ministry of Education, Culture and Science will strengthen the strategic dialogue with individual institutions by discussing with them the distinctive choices they make in terms of their priorities in teaching and research. Relevant, up-to-date policy information will be published on a single public platform. Fact-finding studies into the need for a revised

funding model will be done. In late 2020 parliament will receive the first progress report on this agenda.