

Netherlands

Introduction

1. This note outlines how functions within the schooling system in the Netherlands are organised. Relevant contextual information is provided to assist understanding of the nature of the system.

Overall context

Structure of Schooling

2. Compulsory school education starts at age five, but the vast majority of children (98%) start school at four.¹
3. Students cannot leave school prior to the age of 18 unless they have achieved a minimum of a basic qualification². From the age of 16, students can meet the education requirement through a combination of education and work, but must attend some form of education for at least two days a week.
4. Primary schooling covers eight years. Students are then 'tracked' to one of four streams of secondary education:
 - pre-university education, lasting six years
 - general secondary education, lasting five years
 - pre-vocational education, lasting four years
 - practical training lasting four years (with the aim of the student directly entering the labour market).
5. At the end of primary schooling, students receive an advisory education report describing their level of attainment and potential, and advising on the most suitable secondary education. They also take a standardised test, which can result on the advice being adjusted "up" a track. There is room for students to shift between tracks at any point during secondary education, although in practice this mainly happens in the first 2-3 years when many schools teach the tracks in combined classes. Further, some students who have successfully completed the pre-vocational qualification move on to study for the general secondary qualification. Similarly some students who have successfully completed the general secondary education qualification, then proceed to pre-university education.
6. General secondary education and pre-university education share a common core curriculum at the lower secondary stage. In upper secondary, students study a set of core subjects together with specialising in one of four study profiles – nature and technology, nature and health, economy and social studies, and culture and social studies – each of which involves the study of specified subjects. The separate school leaving qualifications for general secondary education and pre-university education involve a combination of national examinations and school-based examinations/assessments.
7. Students in the pre-vocational track are further tracked into a theoretical, combination, framework vocational or practical vocational track, and study for a

¹ The compulsory age for schooling was reduced from six to five in 1985.

² This additional requirement was introduced in 2007.

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specific pre-vocational qualification related to one of ten profiles³. The programme of study and the resulting qualification relates to a specific occupational standard⁴.

8. All pre-vocational secondary profiles involve a general and occupation specific component.⁵ The general component consists of Dutch, arithmetic, social studies, physical education and at least two subjects in visual arts, music, dance or drama, and also English in the case of the middle management pre-vocational qualification. As part of their qualification, students are required to complete a national examination in Dutch and arithmetic, and also in English for those students seeking a middle management pre-vocational qualification, as well as school-based written and practical exams/assessments. The school-based assessment includes a practical assignment on a theme from the sector in which the student is studying.
9. The Inspectorate of Education supervises the quality of school-based assessments for all secondary level qualifications, checking that schools meet government standards relating to what is assessed, the level of complexity and the assessment procedures.⁶ Schools can lose their authorisation to undertake these assessments, and must then contract assessment to an authorised third party.

Overall size and structure of the system

10. The Netherlands' school system is more than three times the size of the New Zealand system, with total school enrolments of some 2.5 million in 2014. As shown in Table 1, the system comprises some 7,900 schools and 1,500 school boards.

Table 1: Number of schools and school boards by level of education – 2014

	Primary education	Secondary education	Secondary vocational education
Number of schools	7158	642	86
Number of school boards	1115	335	66

11. The system is structured into primary schools and secondary schools, including some specialising in vocational education. Many secondary schools are combined schools offering several types of secondary education, which provides some flexibility for students to move between different streams/tracks. Notwithstanding the relatively high population density in the Netherlands, there is a significant share of smaller schools particularly at the primary level, with 20 percent of primary schools having a roll of less than 100.

³ Construction, housing and interior; services and products; economy and entrepreneurship; green; hospitality, bakery and recreation; maritime and technical; media, design and IT; mobility and transport; production, installation and energy; care and wellbeing.

⁴ The standard describes the qualification level; the job role, core activities and work processes, and the result of these activities; requirements relating to competences, skills and knowledge, requirements relating to attitude and behaviour; and the required degree of responsibility and autonomy.

⁵ Upper secondary vocational schools are well resourced and perform well, with strong links to the labour market that are mediated through extensive work-based learning. It is suggested that the quality of provision mitigates against tracking into pre-vocational secondary education resulting in second class schooling.

⁶ Stricter requirements relating to pre-vocational qualifications came into force in August 2017.

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12. The Netherlands' school system is underpinned by the principle of freedom of education, which dates to the early 20th century, and is protected by the Dutch Constitution. It allows any person to set up a school, organise teaching and determine the education, religious or ideological principles on which teaching is based. This has led to a very substantial role for independent schools – at the primary level some two thirds of schools are government funded independent schools.⁷ These schools operate under the same legal framework as public schools and are funded on an equivalent basis (compared to New Zealand, these schools sit somewhere in between state integrated and state schools).
13. This context has materially impacted on the institutional design of the Netherlands' school system. The principle of freedom of education implies a large measure of autonomy, especially in regard to curriculum and pedagogy. This applies to both public and independent schools. The government is responsible for “what” is required of schools, while schools have autonomy over “how” they do this.
14. The Netherlands also has a small number of private schools, including half of the country's international schools. Private schools are not government funded. These schools must offer the same level of competence and curriculum areas as government funded schools.

Achievement

15. The Netherlands has a high performing school system as measured by the performance of 15 year olds in PISA and the OECD Survey of Adult Skills. In regard to PISA, the Netherlands performs above average in reading, maths and science. In all three subjects it has one of the highest percentage of top performing students among participating countries. However, this share has fallen over time in maths and science, contributing to the decline in performance shown in Table 2. This is a particular area of concern for the government.

Table 2: Netherlands Performance in PISA

	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015
Reading	n/a	513	507	508	511	503
Maths	n/a	538	531	515	523	512
Science	n/a	524	525	507	522	509

16. The Netherlands also performs well in terms of equity. In PISA, it has a relatively low proportion of poor performers. Basic skills are very good on average and the OECD suggests that the Netherlands minimises weak skills among teenagers as effectively as Japan and Korea. A student's social background has less impact on achievement than in many other countries, and in particular compared to other countries that have highly stratified systems (tracking).
17. Within the Netherlands, government agencies, particularly the school Inspectorate, are also concerned about variability in the quality of schools, and the degree of disparity in secondary education outcomes.⁸

⁷ For example, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindustani, Steiner.

⁸Disparity in education outcomes are a feature of stratified systems, but compared to other similar systems the Netherlands has a high degree of disparity.

System Structure

18. The Netherlands has three levels of government – the national level, 12 provincial governments and 403 municipal councils.

National level government

19. Overall responsibility for school education rests with the national level government, and specifically the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the State Secretary (junior Minister) for Education, Culture and Science. The four key national level organisations are:
- a. the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
 - b. DUO, the executive agency of the Ministry
 - c. the Inspectorate of Education
 - d. The College of Tests and Exams (roughly the equivalent of NZQA).
20. The national level government sets the requirements for primary, secondary and vocational school education. It is also responsible for structuring and funding the system, for system monitoring including school inspections, for examinations and for student support. The government steers the system through imposing qualitative or quantitative standards relating to the education process in schools or the attainment of results, through the allocation of resources, and by imposing conditions that must be met by schools.

Provincial authorities

21. The role of provincial level authorities is limited to supervisory and legal tasks. Provincial authorities are required to ensure the availability of an adequate number of public secondary schools. They also act as an appeal body in relation to decisions that municipalities take on property for independent schools.

Municipalities

22. The administration of primary, secondary and vocational schools is the responsibility of municipal councils,⁹ with this including certain powers in relation to independent schools.
23. All schools – public and private – are governed by a ‘Competent Authority’, which is the legal body responsible for implementing legislation and regulations in schools. In the case of public schools, the competent authority is the municipal council. However, this responsibility can be delegated to a committee of the council or a foundation set up by the municipal council, or jointly with another council.¹⁰ Nowadays, most municipalities organise public schooling through the foundation arrangement. The Board of the foundation is the Competent Authority for its public schools. The ‘Competent Authority’ of an independent school is the board of the association or foundation that maintains it.
24. Municipal authorities also have direct responsibility for ensuring school attendance of children of compulsory school age¹¹, and registering early school leavers under the age of 23 and co-ordinating regional policy to meet their needs.
25. They are also responsible for preparing annual plans for the provision of schooling in their area, including for the provision of new public and independent schools,

⁹ Elected once every four years.

¹⁰ Municipal Councils have been able to establish foundations to operate public schools since 1997.

¹¹ The Netherlands has quite rigorous rules around attendance, with truancy officers mandated to issue sanctions to parents and also students (once they have reached their teens).

for allocating some of the funding to mitigate educational disadvantage, and for school transport.

School Governance

26. Schools have both a Competent Authority and a Participation Council. The Competent Authority is responsible for governance of the school and is accountable, through the Inspectorate of Education, to the national level government for the quality of education provided to students.¹² The Participation Council, provides a means for horizontal accountability to parents, students and staff. A mechanism is provided to resolve disputes between the Competent Authority and the Participation Council.¹³

Competent Authority – ‘Board’

27. The Competent Authority is responsible for administering and managing the school, with most powers vested in the Authority rather than the school itself. The Competent Authority is responsible for overseeing the implementation of standards and requirements set by the national level government, curriculum policy, student admission policy, personnel matters and financial management.¹⁴ While some its powers can be delegated to the school head, responsibility still rests with the Authority.

28. The vast majority of primary schools are governed by a Competent Authority that governs more than one school. Single school authorities exist across the primary and secondary level, but account for a greater share of schools at the secondary level, especially vocational schools. Some Competent Authorities are responsible for more than 20 schools. The national level government has encouraged mergers to strengthen the capacity of Competent Authorities and financial stability.

29. The boards of Competent Authorities can be made up of volunteers or professionals with specific expertise. Volunteers might be parents of students, citizens from the community, or in the case of independent schools, members of a religious or life philosophy. There is not an electoral process to appoint board members. Existing board members jointly recruit and appoint new voluntary (or ordinary) members. The Participation Council is the employer of professional board members and is also responsible for reviewing their performance.¹⁵

Participation Council

30. The Participation Council functions as an independent monitor of the Competent Authority, as well as a means of stakeholder participation in key decisions. It is made up of an equal number of elected staff and parent/pupil representatives, and varies in size from 6 to 18 members.¹⁶

31. The Participation Council has a general right to be informed and to give consent on key issues affecting the school. For example, the consent of the Council is required for changes to the school’s educational aims, the school plan, the curriculum or the school’s complaints procedure. The Participation Council has a

¹² This was clarified by the Good Education Good Governance Act 2010.

¹³ The role of the principal in relation to both the Competent Authority (Board) and the Participation Council can be complex. It is suggested that school leaders can often get caught between the Board and the Council.

¹⁴ Schools are funded on a lump sum basis, which gives the Competent Authority considerable freedom to make spending choices.

¹⁵ The OECD suggests that reviews of performance are not always undertaken by the Participation Council, and has questioned whether these Councils consistently have the capability to undertake effective reviews.

¹⁶ Pupils in primary schools are not represented on the Participation Council.

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specific role in consenting to the level of parental donations,¹⁷ and at the secondary level has role in advising on the school timetable, the duration of lessons and the start and end time of the school day.

Strategic Documents

32. Every school is required to have a school plan, a school prospectus, and a complaints procedure.
33. The school plan sets the school's policies on educational matters, staffing and internal quality assurance, including describing the steps taken to monitor and improve school quality. The Competent Authority accounts to both the Education Inspectorate and the Participation Council through the plan. The plan can cover multiple schools, where its Competent Authority is responsible for more than one school. The plan must be updated every four years.
34. The school prospectus provides information to parents and students about the school's objectives, how it intends to achieve them and what it has achieved. It also provides detail on the voluntary parental contribution and the rights and obligations of parents and students. The prospectus must be updated annually.
35. The complaints procedure must include a complaints committee with an independent chair person.

Sector Organisations

36. Competent Authorities have formed representative bodies. Traditionally these were organised on sector/denomination line, but since 2002 have become more concentrated and secularised in the form of a separate primary and secondary council. These councils have become the employer organisations for schools. They also operate as a support structure, providing networking and professional development opportunities for Boards as well as providing support to schools. The government also engages with these councils as part of the policy process, often working in collaboration with them.¹⁸

Curriculum

37. The Netherlands does not have a national curriculum, but rather prescribes areas of learning, and at the primary and lower secondary level sets specific attainment targets. These are standards of knowledge, understanding and skills that students are required to have. Over time the trend has been for the government to further elaborate these targets, in the form of more detailed content and activities. At the upper secondary level the various curricula are effectively framed by qualification requirements.
38. Competent Authorities/schools have autonomy to develop their own curriculum and teaching and learning programmes within this framework. A national institute for curriculum development – the Knowledge Centre for Teaching Resources – supports schools by providing an overview of all available resource materials.

Primary

39. The required areas of learning are physical education, Dutch, maths, English, social studies, and religious and ideological movements, expressive activities,

¹⁷ The parental representatives only.

¹⁸ The OECD suggests that from a policy perspective the government interacts more with Competent Authorities rather than principals.

self-reliance and healthy living. Schools can choose to provide teaching in additional areas.

Secondary

40. Secondary education is intended to prepare young people for full participation in society and employment appropriate to their knowledge and skills. It is positioned as part of a continuous learning trajectory, preparing students to go on to appropriate further education.
41. At the lower secondary level, there are 58 attainment targets which apply to all secondary students. Schools are required to spend two thirds of teaching and learning time focused on meeting these targets during the first two years of lower secondary education. There are also requirements relating to foreign language learning which vary with the student's chosen secondary education pathway.
42. Schools decide on how they group the attainment targets into subjects, projects, and areas of learning. However, they must structure their curriculum so students have an uninterrupted pathway from primary to lower secondary education, and from lower secondary to upper secondary, and have the opportunity to choose from all the relevant sectors/areas of specialisation at the upper secondary level.
43. At the upper secondary level, examination regulations provide guidance as to the content of the curricula for general secondary and pre-university upper secondary education, and occupation standards provide guidance for pre-vocational education. There is a requirement for overall hours of study, but not prescription for individual subject areas.¹⁹

Teacher Quality and School Leadership

Teacher Quality

44. The Netherlands is regarded as having a competent teacher workforce. However, at the secondary level, teachers are not always qualified in subjects that they teach. More generally, the Education Inspectorate and the OECD have identified encouraging students to reach their full potential, teaching students with different abilities in the same class²⁰, and providing sufficient feedback as areas of relative weakness. The OECD has also suggested the need to strengthen collaboration.
45. There are three separate teaching qualifications:
 - Primary education qualification - a four year integrated bachelor programme covering education and practice at a university of applied science, or a 3 year bachelor programme in educational science and teaching at a university. Both qualify the teacher to teach across all subject areas with the exception of physical education.
 - Secondary education (level 2), - a four year integrated bachelor programme covering both subject content and practice, with teachers specialising in particular subject areas.
 - Secondary education (level 1) – a three year bachelor programme specialising in a subject area, followed by a one or two year pedagogical and didactical integrated programme at the masters level. This qualification is

¹⁹ Based on a study load calculator, which also includes hours on homework etc. Prior to 2015-16 there was more detailed prescription of study hours.

²⁰ At the secondary level this is becoming an increasingly important issue, given increasing variability of student ability within the different secondary tracks as a result of initial decisions around student placement.

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required to teach students at the upper secondary level for the pre-university and general secondary programmes.

46. Primary level initial teacher education is provided in 27 universities of applied sciences and 6 universities, and secondary training in nine universities.²¹ There is considerable flexibility in programme design, but students must meet minimum competency requirements across seven domains, and the programmes are accredited by the Education Inspectorate.²² The domains relate to interpersonal, pedagogical, subject specific and didactical, and organisation skills as well as co-operation with colleagues and the environment, and self-reflection and development.²³ All programmes involve a significant practical element.²⁴
47. Since 2010, the Netherlands has made entry to initial teacher education programmes more selective. Previously students required either a pre-university diploma or a general secondary diploma. Additional requirements have been put in place relating to students' cognitive skills, particularly in language and maths.
48. In 2010, language and maths test requirements were introduced for first year initial teacher education. In 2013/14 further tests were introduced to test language and maths skills at the end of initial teacher education. Since 2015/16 candidates with a general secondary education diploma must meet specific subject knowledge requirements.²⁵ As a result, the intake into initial teacher education was 30 percent lower than the previous year.²⁶
49. The Netherlands has also moved to strengthen arrangements for teacher induction. Separately, in 2011 a national register for teachers was established. Registration was initially voluntary but has since been made compulsory. To become and stay registered, teachers need to be qualified and demonstrate that they meet professional development requirements (160 hours per four years). Schools are also required to maintain a record of the competencies of each teacher together with agreed professional development. This enables the government to monitor the quality of the teacher workforce.
50. Teachers are employed by the Competent Authority of a school (normally in its general service rather than to a specific school). The Competent Authority is responsible for the supervision, evaluation and professional development of teachers.
51. The government is seeking to move to annual reviews of teachers' performance by 2020. Previously primary teachers were required to have a performance review at least once every four years, and secondary teachers at least once every three years. In 2016 the OECD reported that 75 to 81 percent of teachers have annual reviews, but identified issues around the quality of the reviews and the extent to which they support the further professional development of teachers.

²¹ Six are general universities and three technical universities.

²² Following the 2015 accreditation round the Inspectorate advised that primary teacher education programmes were markedly better than six years earlier, but the quality remained variable.

²³ Required by the Education Professions Act 2006.

²⁴ In addition to practicums, it is possible to work in schools (with support) alongside study for part of the final year of some programmes.

²⁵ This requirement does not apply to candidates who hold the pre-university qualification.

²⁶ While acknowledging the value of ensuring that candidates for initial teacher education have adequate cognitive skills, the OECD has raised concerns that the exclusive focus on cognitive skills is unduly narrow and does not take sufficient account of considerations such as disposition to teach.

52. Competent Authorities are responsible for professional development of teachers, with professional development often provided by initial teacher education institutions. As part of its steering of the system, the central government also enters voluntary agreements with schools in relation to focus areas for professional development. Separately, the government is seeking to increase the number of teachers with Masters level qualifications. Teachers can apply for grants to support study at the Masters or PhD level.
53. Sector organisations for Competent Authorities, rather than the government, negotiate collective agreements, although the government is closely involved due to the budget considerations.

School Leadership

54. A principal may have responsibility for more than one school, especially at the primary level. The precise duties and powers of the principal are determined by the Competent Authority. In general, the principal is responsible for the day to day running of the school, and helps to plan and implement the school's personnel policy and financial policy.
55. The principal is appointed by the Competent Authority following an open selection process.²⁷ Principals of primary schools must hold a higher education certificate and a certificate of good conduct, but only require a certificate of competence in teaching if they perform teaching duties. In practice most principals are qualified teachers. At the secondary level, head teachers require a certificate of good conduct and a teaching certificate in one of the subjects offered by the school.
56. Most new principals receive some leadership training, although this is not mandatory. Further, induction programmes for new school leaders are not common, with only 12 percent of principals having participated in a substantial induction and mentoring programme.
57. In 2013, a competence profile for principals was developed, although the OECD suggests this is unduly abstract, providing a limited basis on which to select, appraise and develop the skills of their school leaders. In parallel, a mandatory register was established for primary school leaders and a voluntary register for secondary leaders, although registration is not related to a leader's performance.
58. The priority given to the ongoing professional development of school leaders does not appear to be particularly strong. Performance reviews to support professional development do not appear well developed, with only a minority of principals receiving an annual performance review. Further, while the OECD TALIS 2013 Survey indicated that almost all principals participated in some form of professional development in the previous 12 months, training intensity was only half the OECD average. There is a network representing primary school principals and an association representing secondary principals, although the latter was only established in 2015.
59. The extent of principals' educational leadership, and their capacity to develop a professional learning culture are areas of weakness raised by the OECD. In a recent review the OECD also suggests that the issue of school leadership has had

²⁷ Regulations support proportional representation of women in senior leadership positions in schools. If women are under-represented in senior posts the Competent Authority must set out a plan to improve representation, including targets, and report against these.

limited policy focus, and raised questions relating to the balance of authority between school leaders and Competent Authorities.

Quality Assurance

60. Quality assurance at the individual school level is through school self-evaluation and external evaluation by the Education Inspectorate, including of the quality of a school's self-evaluation activities. This is complemented by well-developed arrangements for monitoring at the system level.

School self-evaluation

61. As noted above, each school is required to have a plan which, among other things, describes the steps taken to monitor and improve school quality and is required to annually report against this. The attainment targets that frame the curriculum support this process by being explicit about expectations for achievement. The capacity of schools and Competent Authorities to effectively undertake self-evaluation for continuous improvement has been identified as an issue by the OECD and the Inspectorate of Education.
62. Since 2012 the government has sought to strengthen school self-evaluation and self-improvement. This is based on an agreement with the respective national bodies for primary and secondary education. Six domains for improvement have been identified, and participating schools receive specific additional funding to advance work on one or more domains making use of external experts from a nationally approved pool. In 2012, some 2,800 schools were involved in this programme.
63. The Ministry of Education and the Inspectorate of Education also support school self-evaluation by providing relevant statistical data held by the centre and supporting schools to create school based indicators.²⁸
64. At the secondary level, data from national qualifications provide schools with good data on educational outcomes. At the primary level, data from an end of primary test is an important source of data. This test has been a longstanding feature of the Netherlands system, with most schools using tests provided by Cito, an internationally reputable provider. Traditionally the purpose of the test was to inform the recommendation for secondary education.²⁹
65. From 2015 it became compulsory for all students to take an attainment test at the end of primary, so that schools are able to assess their performance in meeting the prescribed attainment targets, with this intended to inform continuous improvement.³⁰ At the same time, a requirement for schools to have a student monitoring system that follows progress at a student, class and school level across various areas of learning was introduced.³¹ In practice, these requirements codified already existing practice in schools.

²⁸ Referred to as Windows on Accountability. The Netherlands has a national student administration data base.

²⁹ The key issue raised in the descriptions of the Netherlands system around placement in secondary education is the inconsistent placement of students with similar levels of attainment in secondary programmes, rather than a concern about the reliability of assessments in the first instance.

³⁰ A single national test was proposed but this does not appear to have been taken forward.

³¹ Cito, provides a system with a consistent set of nationally standardised tests for longitudinal assessment of a student's achievement together with a system for manual or automated registration of student progress. At the primary level, the focus for monitoring includes language, arithmetic, world orientation (geography, history and biology), social emotional development, English, science and technology. At the lower secondary level the focus is Dutch reading and comprehension, English reading and comprehension, mathematics and study skills.

External Inspections

66. The Inspectorate of Education is a key institution in the Netherlands system, with considerable authority. It is responsible for the external evaluation and control of schools. In 2017 its mandate was extended to include the inspection of governing bodies (Competent Authorities), not just individual schools.
67. All schools are inspected at least once every four years. The Inspectorate uses a risk-based approach, involving an initial screening using a limited set of information (including data on achievement) to determine whether schools are subject to a basic or 'adapted'/more intensive inspection. Its work is guided by an inspection framework which sets out the inspection process and the indicators and quality standards used to evaluate schools. The quality standards were developed in co-operation with schools and their stakeholders.
68. The Inspectorate has previously used a 'quality score card' to publicly communicate the results of inspections, but this has been replaced by a higher level classification of schools, including the specific identification of those that are weak or very weak.
69. Schools that are assessed as weak or very weak are subject to supervision by the Inspectorate while also being provided additional support. The Inspectorate makes specific recommendations for improvement which schools are required to implement and has the power to impose sanctions, which can include the withholding of funding. The additional support is subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and provided by external organisations. It can include twinning the school with a well performing school. Schools identified as very weak have a two year window to improve performance, or are otherwise subject to closure.

System Level Monitoring

70. System level evaluation is mostly controlled by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and has a number of complementary elements. An important source of information is data from school leaving qualifications and the end of primary test.
71. Separately, there are long standing data sets from sample based periodic assessments and from cohort studies. The period assessments involve sample testing of students primarily at year 8, but sometimes at other year levels. There is a particular focus on language and mathematics, but other areas are also assessed. The cohort studies, monitor the progress and attainment of specific cohorts of students over time, using a sample of around 20,000 students with assessments at years two, five and eight and in the third year of general secondary education and in year two of vocational secondary education.³² The focus of these studies is language and mathematics.
72. System evaluation is also informed by participation in international assessments, together with specific small scale evaluation projects commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.³³ Separately the Education

³² These are a joint venture between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Central Bureau of Statistics and the organization for scientific research.

³³ The OECD suggests that evaluation expertise is well developed in the Netherlands. A range of research institutes and university departments have the skills to carry out various forms of educational evaluation. This is supported by national expert committees and university networks for educational research.

Inspectorate, which has developed a reputation for a systematic approach, is required to report annually to Parliament on the state of education.

School Choice

73. Consistent with the principle of freedom of education, choice is an integral feature of the Netherlands' system.

Freedom to enrol at any school

74. In principle, schools must accept any enrolment relevant to that school type³⁴, although there are a few exceptions to this:
- a. It is possible for independent schools to refuse to enrol students on the grounds that their families do not subscribe to the school's religious or philosophical principles. The rules around this are restrictive and tightly enforced, so few independent schools make use of this possibility. Most independent schools accept all students.
 - b. Schools have a legal "obligation of care" and must accept any child with learning support needs. At the same time, schools work together across a region to provide sufficient learning support with some mainstream schools specialising in certain forms of support. Where a school feels that it cannot provide the right support, the school can arrange, in consultation with the parents, for the child to be enrolled at another school. Under its "obligation of care", the original school must enrol the child and provide adequate support until this happens. There are external supports in place to ensure that parents' wishes are sufficiently taken into consideration.
 - c. Midyear: if a school is full. However, the capacity of the school must have been publicly communicated previously, and this must be applied consistently to all enrolments.
 - d. Before a new school year: if a school is oversubscribed, in which case the school must treat all new enrolments consistently and transparently. In practice this is usually done through a ballot, overseen by a notary. Some Competent Authorities in urban areas with multiple oversubscribed primary schools may run loose versions of enrolment schemes to spread students across their schools of the same type.
75. In cities with multiple oversubscribed schools, students sometimes have to take part in ballots at multiple schools before getting a spot at a school. To make the process smoother, the different Competent Authorities in these cities are working together to create one unified process. Amsterdam, for example, has moved to a centralised secondary school preference system where parents register their ranked preference for a number of schools. An algorithm then optimally allocates all students so that as many as possible are allocated to their top choices. This has replaced the ballot that each school used to run separately, and combined them all into what is in effect one, weighted ballot. Amsterdam has also introduced this for primary schools, but with an additional weighting for distance to ensure children have access to the schools nearest to them if the parents want a school nearby.

³⁴ Subject to the child's age and, in the case of a secondary school, the school offering the secondary track relevant to the advice from the primary school.

Informed School Choice

76. Policy settings seek to support informed choice. Information on school performance, including from the Inspectorate of Education is publicly available. The school prospect is also an important source of information to parents.

School choice and costs to parents

77. The real and perceived costs of education for parents are different than in New Zealand. Enrolment/attendance at all state and independent schools is free of charge. Donations regulations are strictly enforced, and a school cannot ask for donations for anything to do with the delivery of the curriculum. There are no school uniforms, and a high population density coupled with good cycle networks mean transport costs are negligible.
78. On the other hand, parents of primary school children do face costs relating to combining work and care depending on which school they send their child to. Schools set their own hours and many have a free afternoon a week or multiple shorter days. Originally, all primary schools closed for lunch and parents either needed to pick up their children or pay for lunch break care. Increasingly, primary schools are working with parents and after school care providers³⁵ to adjust their school hours so that parents are better able to combine work and care. This gives the school a competitive advantage over other schools, and is attractive for particular groups of parents, but also has the potential to lower the diversity in the school. It can also introduce a cost to parents depending on their lunch break and after school care needs and the costs of this at other schools.

Diversity

79. In 2016, some 22 percent of the Dutch population had a migrant background, with this defined as having at least one foreign-born parent. Some 12 percent of the population are from non-Western backgrounds with these populations concentrated in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. At the individual school level, the extent of diversity is impacted by the concentration of students from non-Western backgrounds in particular areas, and the role of independent schools.

Equity

80. Additional funding is provided to help schools offset disadvantage, particularly at the primary level.
81. Freedom of choice means that it is not possible to control a school's level of disadvantage. However, the competent authorities in some cities are working together to get a more equitable spread of students across schools. Nijmegen's centralised primary school registration system gives priority to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have a preference for a school with less than 30 percent disadvantaged students.³⁶

Concluding Comments

82. The principle of freedom of education is fundamental to the Netherland's system. School choice, the substantial role of independent schools in school provision and

³⁵ Schools are required to work with after school care providers to ensure that parents have access to after-school care options.

³⁶ OECD, *Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective*, 2015; Website of Nijmegen school registration "Schoolwijzer Nijmegen".

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school autonomy, especially around curriculum and teaching, have been longstanding features of the system, rather than new dimensions the system has been adjusting to over the last two decades. To the extent that there has been an increase in autonomy over this this period, it has been around factors such as financial management and personnel policy. At the same time the government appears to have shifted towards greater central control of teaching and learning, for example, through the greater elaboration of attainment targets

83. System design also appears to seek to balance the autonomy required by the principle of freedom of education with strong accountability, in the form of clearly specified expectations via attainment targets and a rigorous qualification system at the end of schooling, through the key role of the Inspectorate of Education, and through well-developed system monitoring. Freedom of education also appears to have materially influenced system design, especially governance arrangements with the respective roles of the dual Competent Authority and the Participation Council.
84. System design appears somewhat less mature in regard to a focus on teacher quality and on supporting continuous system improvement. The former might again be influenced by the freedom of education, with the nature of teaching being integral to this principle. In regard to the latter, the OECD commented in its most recent review that the Netherlands has a strong focus on addressing weak schools but could usefully supplement this with strengthening the focus on school improvement. Many of its recommendations related to strengthening the quality of teaching and school leadership, and also raised questions about the balance of the role of principals and Boards/Competent Authorities.
85. Another interesting feature of the Netherland's system is relatively early tracking (age 12) and the highly stratified nature of secondary education. While the OECD ordinarily expresses reservations from an equity perspective about early tracking, it concluded that in the Netherlands the system overall delivers good results – its view could be summed up as 'don't try to fix something that is not broke'.

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