

Summary

Alternative routes in Dutch higher education

Educational careers and institutional policy

Routes to higher education

The principal routes into higher education in the Netherlands are from senior general secondary education (HAVO) to higher professional education (HBO) and from pre-university education (vwo) to university (wo). In addition, however, there are a number of less usual routes, such as from senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education, from pre-university education to higher professional education or from higher professional education (foundation or bachelor's programme) to university.

In practice, the routes from senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO) and from HBO to university are important mainly for young people from lower social backgrounds and non-Western migrants, who are less often found in the higher tracks of secondary education (HAVO and vwo).

Among these less common routes to higher education, the transition from MBO to HBO is still fairly widespread: around three out of ten first-year HBO students have come from MBO. The percentage of students with an MBO diploma who go on to higher professional education has been declining for several years. After a brief revival, probably due to the announcement of the scrapping of the basic student grant, this downward trend appears to have resumed in the first cohort of students under the student loan system. It remains to be seen how many of this cohort will transfer to HBO indirectly (after a gap year).

The number of students transferring from HBO to university degree programmes is also declining, though the relatively small proportion of students who complete an HBO foundation course before transferring to university remains stable. The decline of these two routes into and within higher education has greater consequences for young people for whom these routes are important, namely children of low-educated parents and those of non-Western origin. Moreover, the number of students from these groups who transfer from MBO to HBO has fallen more steeply in recent years than for other groups, and this decline is more marked for those of non-Western origin than for Dutch natives.

Reasons for deciding not to progress to HBO

To what extent financial considerations play a role in the decision not to go on to HBO is not entirely clear. Respondents in the school-leavers surveys carried out by the Dutch Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) as part of the School-leavers Information System (SIS) more often cite a preference for going to work than financial considerations (costs of study, need for an income). It may be that the ability to earn an income also plays a role for respondents who would prefer to work. MBO students with parents who are low-educated or who are of non-Western origin cite financial considerations more often

than other respondents, despite the availability of student finance (still the basic grant at the time of the surveys). Initial findings of other recent research among MBO students show that finance is the most frequently reported reason for deciding not to go on to HBO. Contrary to expectations, this factor did not increase in importance after the introduction of student loans.

Educational careers of HBO students less successful than university students

If we look at students' higher education careers, the contrast between higher professional and university education is striking. A substantial proportion of HBO students switch programmes or drop out of higher education after the first year (20% and 15%, respectively). Viewed over a longer period, the number of students switching has increased, though in the most recent year covered by the study it reduced slightly.

Linked to the increased proportion of students switching programmes, the percentage of students who had obtained a degree after five or eight years has also declined. A growing number of students have still not graduated after five years.

HBO students who switch programmes after the first year are also less successful in their subsequent educational careers than students who stick with their original choice. Switching may be necessary in order to correct an inappropriate initial choice, but is by no means always successful.

Many university students also switch programmes after the first year, but the number of students who drop out altogether is much lower than in higher professional education. University students complete their studies more quickly, and the percentage who have graduated after four years increases sharply in successive entry cohorts – though the caveat needs to be applied here that the number of university students graduating after four years was fairly low. The graduation rates of recent university entry cohorts compare favourably with HBO students, whereas in the past it was the other way around. University students who switch programmes also do considerably better subsequently than their HBO counterparts. Switching by university students is more effective as a means of correcting their initial choice and is less of a harbinger of dropout than in HBO.

If the educational careers of HBO students in general are less successful, this applies even more so for those with a background in senior secondary vocational education (MBO). The switching and dropout rates have increased more sharply in this than among those entering higher professional education from senior general secondary education (HAVO), and their graduation rates have fallen more steeply; in the past, the graduation rates of former MBO students after five years were better than those of students with a HAVO background, that is no longer the case in recent entry cohorts.

Matching problems are an important factor in the less successful educational careers of MBO students entering higher education. By comparison, the educational careers of the – albeit not very large – group of students transferring to university after completing an HBO foundation course are successful.

Policy variation between institutions

Higher education institutions pursue a variety of policies on student intake, placement and support in order to promote suitable study choices and student success. There is variation not only between different institutions, but often also between the different programmes within a single institution. Respondents were cautiously positive regarding the study choice review. Issues do however arise both for lecturers who have to advise students on their choice of study – they do not like advising a student against a particular programme – and for students, who sometimes regard the review as a sort of admission exam, even though they do not always follow the advice to switch to a different programme.

While education institutions can be slightly more selective in their intake policy, for example regarding MBO students applying for HBO programmes that do not match their MBO diploma, they do not always use that discretion. HBO students who transfer to university do however have to follow special transfer programmes and make good any shortcomings, and the same applies for HAVO students following HBO programmes with a profile that does not match their qualifications. Generally speaking, education institutions do not feel that the accessibility of higher education has declined, but do believe that programmes have become more selective. There appears to be some hesitancy regarding greater selectivity in admissions procedures, despite the sometimes high rates of switching and dropout. Those concerned do however feel that the selection criteria used are insufficiently proven; we shall return to this later. They also consider it important that education should continue to fulfil an emancipatory function.

What is going well?

One positive factor is the high rate of participation in higher education in the Netherlands; today, 55% of young people enter higher professional or university education. Higher education can be accessed via several routes; this study looked at some of the less usual routes, namely from senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO) and from HBO to university.

A second positive point is that there are several possible routes into higher education; this is a strong characteristic of the system and helps raise participation in higher education. Not every pupil at the start of their secondary school career is placed in the most appropriate educational track for their academic level. It is also not always possible to establish that level definitively: the achievement levels of some pupils within a particular education track overlap with those of some pupils in lower or higher tracks (OECD 2016). There are also late developers, who show their true achievement level later than their peers. In addition, students who are already studying in senior secondary vocational and higher professional education undergo development and can suddenly find the idea of learning more appealing. The alternative routes into and within higher education are of great importance for all these students. Around 30% of those entering higher professional education have an MBO background, while 15% of entrants to university undergraduate programmes transfer from HBO.

Another positive development is the increase in success rates at university, which have traditionally been fairly low. It would seem that the measures taken to improve placement and transfers have been effective. Although the number of students switching programmes is still considerable, this occurs mainly at the beginning of their studies and does not appear to significantly affect the rest of their educational career. Dropout rates from university are fairly low, especially compared with higher professional education.

One welcome development in higher professional education is that the attainment targets are being maintained, to a greater extent than was sometimes the case in the past. Those we interviewed reported an improvement in quality assurance in HBO courses, a picture that also emerges from the accreditations (RCHO 2016). This will have the beneficial effect of removing questions about the value of an HBO qualification.

Based on our interviews, it would seem that a 'cultural sea change' has taken place in Dutch higher education, partly thanks to the introduction of targets. Although there have been moves in the past to increase contact with students and improve placement, this is now much more structured. Both students and higher education institutions value the early contact. The (negative) binding recommendation given to students who fail to obtain the required number of credits now also appears to be accepted by students, provided it is limited to the first year of study. This may have made studying 'a bit more like being at school', as one respondent put it, but it has encouraged students to devote themselves more to their studies and achieve results.

What is going less well?

Apart from a brief revival in the last two years that the basic student grant was available, the number of students transferring from MBO to HBO is slowly declining. This transfer route is used more by young people from a low-educated or non-Western background, but this has become less common recently. Although many MBO students with a non-Western background still go on to HBO, their number is falling more steeply than among their Dutch native counterparts. The breakdown of the student population by previous education (HAVO, VWO, MBO) is nevertheless fairly stable. As the total number of students with an MBO diploma has increased, the number of MBO students in HBO has remained more or less unchanged. Despite the declining transfer rate, those who progress from MBO to HBO experience many matching problems. Some drop out, and their number is increasing. MBO students exhibit knowledge gaps in language, arithmetic/mathematics and English (HAVO students also lack numerous study skills).

The volume of students transferring from HBO to university, which has always been low, has also declined. This need not be seen as an entirely negative trend, however, because those students do attain an HBO degree. On the downside, this transfer route to the highest level of education is relatively important for students with a non-Western background. The percentage of students entering university after completing an HBO foundation year has remained unchanged.

We found a decline in success rates in HBO, with students taking longer to complete their studies. According to respondents, this is related to the stricter quality standards applied by universities of applied sciences (HBO institutions), and possibly also to a growing demand for research skills that students do not fully possess. It is concerning that quality standards and success rates appear to be communicating vessels in this regard.

Switching is also a major problem in higher professional education: it happens often (and repeatedly) and leads to delays and dropout. Some of those dropping out are MBO students who already have a qualification which enables them to find work; some of them, however, are students with a background in senior general secondary education (HAVO) who are inadequately equipped for the labour market, and who will often venture back into higher professional education at a later stage.

There are several groups – such as (non-Western) boys, late applicants – and programmes (in the economics and education sectors) where there is a greater risk of switching and especially of dropout. Despite undergoing a study choice review, some young people still embark on a programme for which their mathematical knowledge or skills, or their command of the Dutch language, are insufficient. A problem that affects all categories of students is the lack of general study skills. These are often essential skills and qualities needed to study, such as independence and the ability to plan, or to process texts from a book. Another area of concern relates to the financial position of some students. In the interviews, examples were cited of students who are working 20 hours a week alongside their studies in order to meet their living costs. In such cases it is exceptionally difficult to study properly and obtain the required number of credits.

Conclusions

All in all, the situation in Dutch higher professional education (HBO) is worrying; by comparison, university education is in a better position. The concerns regarding HBO relate to more problematic switching, higher dropout rates and falling success rates. The poor match between MBO and HBO programmes appears to affect certain groups particularly badly, exacerbating those concerns. Some economics and education programmes, both higher professional and university, have very high switching or dropout rates, and the measures taken to remedy this do not yet appear to be having sufficient effect. As regards university education, both universities and students appear to be becoming accustomed to focusing on a rapid pace of study in the first year; this appears to be effective, because success rates at university have improved.

Discussion

Conflict between accessibility and educational success?

In this report we have seen that there are problems with the transfer from senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO), and that these problems mainly seem to affect young people from less privileged backgrounds. Does this mean that the accessibility of higher education is under threat? Large numbers of MBO stu-

dents, especially those of non-Western origin, still go on to higher professional education, and because of this restrictions are sometimes lifted for HBO entrants wishing to enrol in programmes that do not match their MBO qualifications. It is thus absolutely not the case that this transfer route – with the exception of primary school teacher training, where selection has been stepped up – has been curbed. As one respondent said, however, there is a difference between accessibility and opportunity. Higher education institutions say they do not want to frustrate students in their choice of study, but in practice that is what sometimes happens. The chances of students with an MBO background being successful in HBO appears to be declining.

Despite this, HBO institutions are reluctant to apply selection in their admission procedures. The dilemma lies in not knowing precisely what should form the basis for selection. This is left to the students themselves after the study choice review, based on the premise that this should lead to a better match between student and course of study. However, it is still unclear how (self-)selective this approach really is. The presumed self-selection moreover does not affect accessibility: even students recommended not to do so can still embark on the study programme of their choice.

Stricter advice for students?

Young people often find it difficult to choose a higher education programme. There are many study programmes on offer, students often have only a vague impression of both the study and the potential job opportunities after graduation, and there are limits in terms of admission requirements and talent.

Students also suffer from 'choice stress'. Parents play a role in this: it emerged from the interviews that, whilst they support their child in making a choice, they sometimes try to influence them too much. Newcomers to higher education can often not count on support from parents who have themselves been through higher education. Students who make a choice that is not based on their own intrinsic preference – on the advice of their parents, for example – are more likely to switch courses or drop out.

Lecturers who interview students during the study choice review are not always willing to relieve the student of a difficult decision or guide them away from an intrinsically motivated but poorly matched choice. Because of this, they do not always recommend a change of study programme, even when this would be logical given the outcome of the review; and where they do so, their advice is not always followed.

Success rates versus quality and development?

There appears to be an opposition between success rates and quality, and between success rates and personal development. The performance targets seem to be focused mainly on increasing success rates, but also focus on quality improvement. Precisely what constitutes quality is open for discussion, but from our interviews with those involved in university education it became clear that the increase in success rates has not taken place at the expense of quality; this is felt to be a false opposition. In higher professional education, by contrast, the falling success rates are put forward as evidence that the quality is all it

should be, because it is less easy for students to complete their studies quickly. The task for higher professional education is to improve success rates without making concessions in terms of the envisaged attainment level. HBO students also benefit both from good education and a qualification whose value is not in dispute, as well as from completing their studies in good time.

Higher professional education is in a different position from university education; the diversity in terms of the previous education of students is greater and HBO fulfils an emancipatory function more explicitly than university education, making it desirable to offer accessibility and opportunity. The task of improving success rates without making concessions on quality would therefore appear to be more difficult than in university education. Lowering course standards or issuing degrees too readily in order to raise the success rate are rightly rejected by respondents. In fact, HBO institutions appear to have introduced a slightly stricter quality control system for graduation, and those we spoke to did not appear to want to change that at present. They do however recognise that a great deal is asked of students in a very formative period in their lives, and believe that there should also be sufficient scope for personal development.

The future: concerns about selection

Most higher education programmes in the Netherlands now include a study choice review, but there are also programmes which apply selection based on a numerus clausus system, either because additional requirements apply (e.g. sports programmes) or because they provide small-scale, intensive teaching (e.g. University Colleges). The number of Bachelor's programmes for which selection is applied has increased in recent years. Admission to restricted (numerus clausus) programmes has in recent years been based increasingly on decentralised selection and less on drawing lots (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2015a).

Decentralised selection will become more important in the future: starting from the academic year 2016/17, the drawing of lots for numerus clausus programmes will be abandoned and student places will be assigned entirely through decentralised selection. At least two different selection criteria must be applied, and admission can therefore not be based exclusively on the grades obtained in the applicant's previous education.

It emerged from our interviews that people find it difficult to identify and apply genuinely good criteria when matching a student with a study programme, and this problem is unlikely to disappear with decentralised selection. As decentralised selection becomes more widespread, the question as to the validity of the selection decision becomes more pertinent.

A further concern relates to the influence of student loans on higher education intake and transfers. Fewer students are currently transferring from senior secondary vocational (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO), and this begs the question of what role the scraping of the basic grant plays in this. It is important that higher education can still be accessed via the 'longer' routes, and that those routes offer a realistic prospect of achieving a higher education level – otherwise, accessibility becomes a hollow concept. If this broad

accessibility comes under pressure, this not only disadvantages young people from less privileged backgrounds, but also raises the prospect of talent being lost.