

Quality of Higher Education in the Netherlands

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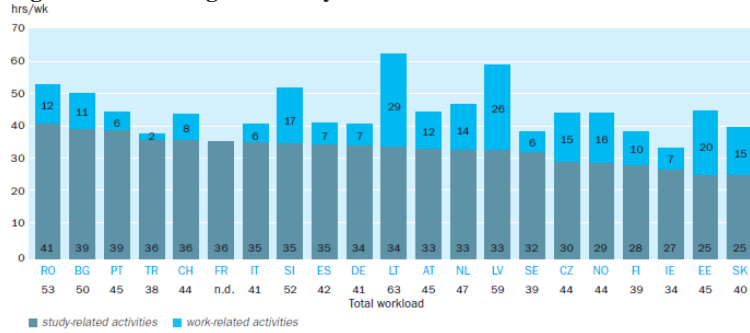
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1. What can we say about the quality of Dutch higher education?

Note: We do not have information on actual learning outcomes of Dutch students compared to other students. Only a few indicative comments can be made about some aspects related to teaching and learning in the Netherlands. The OECD's **AHELO project** will give some comparative information on learning outcomes in universities, but the project is in the preparatory stage and there are no data yet for any generalization on the quality of Dutch higher education.

- Since preparing young people for the labour market is one of the most important tasks of higher education, **labour market success** can be interpreted as one indication of educational quality. Compared to other countries Dutch students do very well in this respect.
 - Unemployment rate among highly educated 20-34 years olds is among the lowest in Europe (ca 2%). However, this outcome needs to be seen in the context that also overall unemployment rate in the Netherlands is among the lowest in Europe (HIS 2009, p. 124)
 - The rate at which Dutch graduates take high-skill positions (ISCO 1/2 and ISCO 3 level) is higher than in most other comparable countries. This is an indication that the skill level of Dutch graduates is quite high. On the other hand, many Dutch graduates report that there is a mismatch between their qualifications and the level of their job, especially in the vertical but also in the horizontal sense. Dutch graduates seem to overestimate the mismatch (HIS 2009, p. 133).
- International higher education literature sees a correlation between **time spent on study related activities** and learning outcomes (Terenzini and Pascarella 2005). Data from the *Eurostudent* survey show that 20% of Dutch students spend less than 20 hours a week on their studies. More than 40% in total spend less than 30 hours a week. Although according to these results many Dutch students do not invest much time in the higher education, the result is quite average on a European scale. While students in Germany, Spain and France spend more time on their studies, students in Finland, Ireland and Sweden spend less time on their studies. However, differences in time investment between countries are very small (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Time budget for study related activities and workload in hours/week, all students



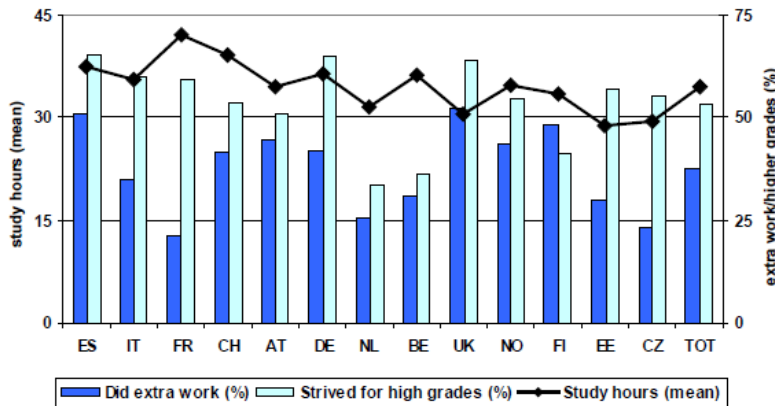
Source: EUROSTUDENT III, Subtopic 4.5. No data E/W. SCO. No data for work-related activities: FR. EUROSTUDENT Questions: 4.5 "How many hours did you spend last week in taught courses, personal study and on paid jobs?"

Source: HIS 2009b, p. 121 Fig 7.4.

- Dutch students demonstrate relatively low **motivation** for their studies. *Studentenmonitor 2007* shows that 5% of students in the HBO sector and 6% in the WO sector are unmotivated. On the other hand, only 12-25% of students are very motivated. This score is higher only in the field of languages and culture – over 35%. . The motivation factor includes indicators such as an ambition to earn high grades, time spent on studies, etc. Many students think that they are underperforming (17% in HBO and 21% in WO).

Low motivation of Dutch students is confirmed also by international research. A study by the ROA demonstrates that compared to students in other countries Dutch students are striving less for high grades and do less extra work that is not necessarily needed for passing exams (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Study behaviour, by country

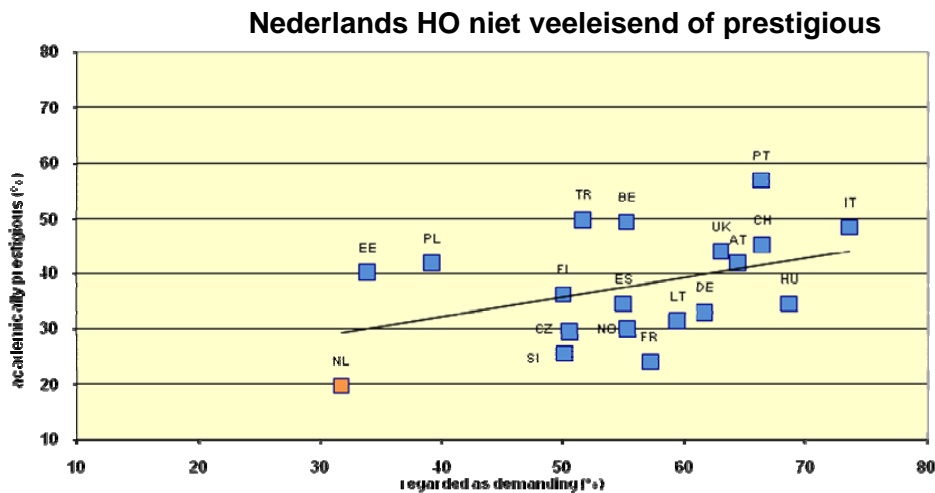


Source: Allen and van der Velden, Fig 5.

- National studies show that Dutch students find **the overall organization of their studies** good. The biggest problem seems to be the approachability and quality of teaching staff. This result seems to be confirmed also by international university rankings (see below). *Studentenmonitor 2007* shows that
 - A great majority of students is satisfied with the overall organization of their studies (*studeerbaarheid*). Only 7% in the HBO sector and 3% in the WO sector find their studies bad.

- Approachability of academic staff to students, feedback from teachers, inspiration from teachers is evaluated much lower. 13% in the HBO sector and 19% in the WO find their teachers non-approachable.
- A very small proportion of students consider work pressure in universities very high. Only 3% both in the HBO sector and WO sector do so.
- The REFLEX project, a major European project that surveyed students in 15 countries, inspired a figure that describes Dutch higher education as **undemanding and non-prestigious** (Figure 3). This information can be easily misinterpreted. This evidence does not show that the prestige of Dutch higher education is lower than that of other countries. It shows that Dutch students do not consider their study programme as more prestigious than programmes in other (Dutch) universities. This reflects the non-hierarchical higher education system in the Netherlands where one university is not regarded as more prestigious than the other. (Note: The data come from a student survey question: was your study programme (1) “generally regarded as demanding” and (2) ... “prestigious”.)

Figure 3. Students' perception of how demanding and prestigious is their study programme, based on the REFLEX study.



Source: van der Velden, 2009

- **Completion rate** in the Netherlands is about the average compared to other comparable countries, a bit on the lower side. The 70% completion rate is lower than 77% in Germany, 81% in Denmark, and 83% in Ireland. On the other hand, graduation rate in the US is only 56 % and in France 64% (HIS 2009, Figure D2.c).

2. Dutch universities in university rankings

Almost all international university rankings are driven by research performance and the results of the rankings do not indicate the quality of education in these institutions. The CHE ranking is the only ranking from which some indication of teaching quality can be seen. However, the quality of teaching in the CHE ranking is measured as the satisfaction of students with various teaching related aspects.

- Since the year 2009 the CHE ranking started to include Dutch universities, in addition to German universities and universities in other German speaking countries. Since this is a very new development, the data is still incomplete. Observing the results of Dutch universities in the CHE ranking, a few broad generalizations can be drawn.
 - Student satisfaction with overall study situation is quite high in Dutch universities. The universities in the ranking are distributed between 3 groups: top 25%, bottom 25%, and middle 50%. As shown in the table below, a large proportion of Dutch universities are placed in the top group.
 - Student satisfaction with counselling activities (accessibility of faculty members, office hours, opportunities to discuss homework) is less good. This confirms the results obtained from national studies.

Table 1. The performance of Dutch universities in the CHE ranking

Discipline	Number of Dutch universities ranked	# in the top 25% Overall satisfaction	# in the top 25% Counselling	# in the top 25% Equipment, facilities
Biology	7	5	4	4
Chemistry	2	2	1	1
Computer Science	4	1	0	0
Dentistry	3	1	1	na
Geography	3	3	0	1
Geoscience	2	2	0	na
Medicine	7	5	3	-
Pharmacy	2	1	0	1
Physics	4	3	0	1

Data source: The CHE university ranking (<http://ranking.zeit.de>)

- Recently the CHE developed an *Excellence Rankings of European Graduate Programmes*. Dutch universities perform well in all selected fields. It must be noted though that the performance is almost entirely dependent on research performance (publications, citations, Marie Curie fellowships, but also international staff and students) and does not say anything about the quality of teaching. In some schools a survey has been conducted and students identify the level of satisfaction with their studies. The number of Dutch universities assigned to the Excellence group, based on research output, is as follows:
 - 4 Dutch universities out of 33 European universities in Biology
 - 3 out of 26 in Chemistry
 - 7 out of 71 in Economics (1 university receives a top score in student satisfaction with study situation)
 - 1 out of 22 in Mathematics
 - 4 out of 22 in Physics
 - 2 out of 52 in Political Science
 - 9 out of 60 in Psychology (3 universities receive a top score in student satisfaction with study situation)

The ranking does not offer a comparison of the quality across the countries though.

- Other rankings have little to offer for evaluating the quality of studies in the Netherlands.
 - *Financial Times* global ranking of business schools is driven primarily by labour market figures (salary, employment rate). One Dutch university (Rotterdam) is in the top 100 by this ranking – number 26.
 - *Times Higher Education-QS World University Ranking* has received quite a lot of attention in the world. This ranking presents top 100 universities in 5 study

fields. The ranking is heavily driven by research and prestige indicators and does not give an indication of teaching quality in these institutions.

3. Quality standards

- The Dutch quality assurance system follows the best practices available. NVAO is an active member in the European and global associations of quality assurance agencies – ENQA and INQUAAHE.
- All programs in the Netherlands go through a regular accreditation and thus pass the minimum quality threshold.
- The Netherlands has been active in developing a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The Dutch NQF is certified as being compatible with the overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). The evaluation by an international panel (NVAO 2009) that preceded the certification pointed out a few challenges, for example:
 - Dutch Master's degrees that are worth 60 ECTS may need to be reviewed. Such a short programme may cause problems with international recognition.
 - The new Ba-Ma degree structure is not entirely established on the labour market, both in terms of its relevance and communication to stakeholders.
 - Although the procedures and documentation related to the NQF are well developed, the actual use of learning outcomes within the institutions is still questionable.

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