Overheid en onderwijsbestel: beleidsvorming rond het Nederlandse onderwijsstelsel (1990-2010)

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Summary

1. Background and research questions

‘Education shall be the constant concern of the Government’. That is stated in Article 23(1) of the Dutch Constitution. Given the new administrative relations in the Netherlands, creating a cohesive, soundly functioning education system and educational context is perhaps the most important task facing the Dutch government today. In seeking to fulfil that task, the government has become largely dependent on the behaviour of the governing boards of schools and other education institutes at local level. This study explores the question of how the government has sought to fulfil its responsibility over the last 20 years.

This question is based on two important political and administrative developments. Politically, there has been a shift in recent decades from ‘makeability’ to market forces. At the same time, at administrative level there has been a move away from centralised to devolved decision-making. It is not only the position and role of the government that have changed over the last 20 years; other players in the policy arena have also seen their influence undergo radical changes.

Two concepts are central in this study: education system and educational context. The education system denotes the infrastructure of schools and education institutes, school types and education programmes, as well as the legislation and regulations which govern them. The educational context is a broader concept, incorporating not just the education system as such, but also the institutionalised setting which influences it: the entire body of government authorities, agencies and organisations within and outside the education field which are concerned with the functioning, continued existence and development of the education system.

The development of policy in relation to the education system and the educational context is described in this study on the basis of four fairly unique features of the Dutch education system:
– freedom of education (Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution);
– the relationship between mainstream and special education;
– (early) selection in the transition from primary to secondary education;
– the position and function of senior secondary vocational education.

Agenda-building and policy development often occur as the result of a perceived systemic problem. A systemic problem exists if situations arise in the structure or configuration of the education system that are regarded as detrimental from the perspective of a given criterion (principle or norm). This study distinguishes between three types of systemic problem:
– transitional and matching problems between and within education sectors;
– problems resulting from a (growing) discrepancy between the existing supply of and (developments in) demand for education;
– problems in the form of undesirable developments in or outcomes of the system.
This study of government responsibility for the education system and educational context is based around four central research questions:

– How did the government fulfil its responsibility for education in the past (up to 1990)?
– How did the policy-building processes in relation to the system characteristics outlined above develop in the period 1990-2010; which topics arose, and which (policy) actors were most closely involved in the various policy processes?
– Why were the various topics highlighted in the context of the four system characteristics above placed on the agenda; what type of systemic problems arose, and what was the influence of the various (policy) actors?
– To what extent and in what way has the government fulfilled its responsibility for the education system and educational context over the last 20 years?

The description of the policy-building process in relation to the four system characteristics (case studies) is based solely on document research – not just policy documents, but also parliamentary papers, advisory reports from key advisory bodies, committee reports, research reports, publications by advocacy groups and media articles. The study covers a period of 20 years (1990-2010).

2. Developments in the education system

The ‘Pacification of 1917’ brought an end to the school funding controversy (Schoolstrijd) in the Netherlands. An amendment to the Dutch Constitution created financial equality between state and private education; prior to this time, the government had funded only publicly provided primary, secondary and university education. Creating financial equality for state and private education required a detailed central legislative and regulatory regime, and a dedicated Ministry of Education was founded for this purpose in 1918.

2.1 Expansion of the education system (1920–1980)

The expansion of the publicly funded education system began in 1920 with the passing of the Primary Education Act (Lager onderwijswet). This opened the way for a marked expansion in (confessional) private primary education. Following the introduction of compulsory education in 1901, special schools were founded for children with physical and/or intellectual disabilities.

A legislative framework was also introduced for vocational education in 1919, in the form of the Technical Education Act (Wet op het nijverheidsonderwijs); prior to this, vocational education had been funded through private initiatives or by industry. The years of reconstruction following the Second World War provided the context for a rapid expansion in the number of schools offering elementary, junior and senior vocational education, especially for technical occupations. The growth of the welfare state in the 1960s and 70s was also accompanied by a strong rise in the number of new vocational training programmes, with further differentiation being introduced in terms of level and discipline. Educational differentiation according to religious and ideological orientation also increased sharply between 1920 and 1980.
In 1980 the education system comprised 17,740 primary schools (8,050 nursery schools, 8,727 primary schools and 963 primary schools), 3,734 secondary schools and (full-time) programmes (1,511 providing junior general secondary (mavo), senior general secondary (havo) and pre-university (vwo) education, 1,293 offering junior vocational education programmes, 577 teaching senior secondary vocational programmes and 353 providing higher professional education). At the start of the 1980s, tertiary education in the Netherlands was provided by the 21 universities.

The financial equality between state and private education which was established following the 1917 Pacification resulted in an education policy that was highly centralised and legalistic. Through the 1960s and 70s, education policy gradually changed from a distributive and allocative approach (distributive fairness) to one of construction and renewal. The publication of the Contours Report (Contourennota) in 1975 was the most important milestone during this period of development.

2.2 Restructuring of the education system and new administrative relations (1980 -2000)

The 1980s saw the basis being laid for the present education system and educational context. The introduction of the Secondary Education Act (Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs) in the early 1980s established a legislative framework covering both general secondary education and junior, senior and higher vocational education. The education system was highly differentiated, and questions were increasingly being raised as to whether the differentiation and resultant selection had not gone too far. The first step on the path towards integration had already been presaged in the Contours Report, in the form of the merging of nursery and primary education. This became a reality with the introduction of a new Primary Education Act (Wet op het basisonderwijs) in 1985. Opinions were strongly divided on the issue of integrating the early years of the different secondary school types to create a common basic education programme. The debate about middle schools had led to a political stalemate, and the decision-making on a common programme ground to a halt for a long time. On the other hand, there was consensus on the proposal to place higher professional education (hbo) and senior secondary vocational education (mbo) within a separate legislative framework, and the Higher Professional Education Act (Wet op het hoger beroepsonderwijs) accordingly came into force in 1986.

Two ministerial policy documents appeared in the middle of the 1980s – ‘Fewer rules, more freedom’ (Minder regels, meer ruimte) and ‘Higher education: autonomy and quality’ (Hoger onderwijs: autonomie en kwaliteit (HOAK)) – which set forth a new policy philosophy for the education sector, calling for fewer and more general rules (deregulation) and greater autonomy for higher education establishments.

The arm’s length administration philosophy advocated in the HOAK policy document was to serve as a model in the following years for the administrative relationships in the other education sectors. In 1988 the policy set out in the document ‘The school on the way to 2000. An administrative philosophy for the 1990s’ (De school op weg naar 2000. Een besturingsfilosofie voor de negentiger jaren) was extended to include primary and secondary education. Here again, the central objective was to increase the autonomy of schools,
especially managerial autonomy (lump-sum funding). By contrast, the establishing of attainment targets at central level reduced educational autonomy, a move which met with fierce resistance in the private education sector. The aim was to replace specific attainment targets by more general instructional objectives, and also less prescription in advance and more focus on retrospective testing of achievement. Increasing the size of schools and school boards was an important condition for increasing their autonomy.

The restructuring of the education system continued in the 1990s. A new Primary Education Act came into force in 1998 (Wet op het primair onderwijs). This Act not only incorporated the statutory provisions governing mainstream primary schools, but also extended to special schools for children with relatively mild problems, children with learning and behavioural difficulties (lom-schools) and children with moderate learning difficulties (mlk-schools); these two school types were merged under the Act to create special primary schools. The Act also provided a statutory basis for the ‘Going to School Together’ (Weer Samen Naar School) policy, which was aimed at accommodating children with special needs in mainstream schools. The remaining special education sectors were given their own statutory framework in that same year, in the form of the Expertise Centres Act (Wet op de expertisecentra).

Little changed in the structure of secondary education in the Netherlands in the 1990s, but there were some fairly seismic shifts in the educational approach. Following the fierce differences of political opinion on the subject of middle schools, every form of structural reform in secondary education had become taboo. Although a programme was introduced in the early 1990s providing for common educational content for all pupils aged between 12 and 15 years, this programme had to be taught within the existing differentiated secondary education system, with all its differing school types. The existing structure also had to be maintained when merging the upper years of pre-vocational education (vbo) and junior general secondary education (mavo) to create pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo). This was achieved by replacing the existing school types and levels with different learning tracks within the vmbo system. Although the structure was not formally changed, the perception was of a clear differentiation in secondary education, between vmbo on the one hand, which prepared pupils for senior secondary vocational education (mbo), on the one hand, and senior general secondary education (havo) and pre-university education (vwo), which prepared pupils to go on to higher education.

Around the turn of the century, a similar integrative operation took place in secondary education to that which had already occurred in primary schools; parts of special secondary education (lom and mlk) were incorporated in the Secondary Education Act (wzo), in the form of learning support (leerwegondersteunend onderwijs) and practical training (praktijkonderwijs).

In 1996, senior secondary vocational education (mbo) programmes were removed from the Secondary Education Act. Together with apprenticeship programmes and a number of adult education provisions, they were given their own legislative framework in the form of the Adult and Vocational Education Act (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs). The majority of mbo programmes were taken over by the newly created regional training centres (roc).
In the higher education sector, the Higher Education and Research Act (Wet hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek) came into force in 1993, replacing the separate laws dating from 1986 which had governed higher professional and university education. The binary structure of higher education, with higher professional education (hbo) alongside university education (wo), was retained in the new Act.

2.3 From system to context: supervision and accountability (2000-2010)

In the first decade of the 21st century, the regulatory activities were transferred from government to players in the education field. The Education Supervision Act (Wet op het onderwijstoezicht) was introduced in 2002; under the Act, the Dutch Inspectorate for Education was given two important functions: upholding basic quality standards in every school and encouraging schools to adopt their own quality assurance systems and quality policy.

A policy document on school governance (Governance: ruimte geven, verantwoordelijkheid vragen en van elkaar leren – ‘Governance: giving scope, taking responsibility and learning from each other’) was published in 2005, setting out the initial contours of the new administrative relations in education and the division of roles, tasks and responsibilities among the various players in the education field. The Good Education, Good Governance Act (Wet goed onderwijs, goed bestuur) which came into effect in 2010 enables the government to intervene where there are serious or long-term concerns about quality in a school or in cases of administrative mismanagement.

3. Features and achievements of the Dutch education system

Chapter 3 of the report describes the main features and achievements of the Dutch education system from two perspectives: by looking at developments in the education system over the last 20 years and by comparing a number of features of the Dutch education system with other systems.

3.1 Trend in the number of education establishments and number of participants (1990-2010)

The total number of schools and other education institutes declined by 30% between 1990 and 2010. The sharpest fall was in senior secondary vocational education (−86%), largely due to two major upscaling operations in this sector between 1986 and 2000. There was also a sharp fall in the number of general secondary schools (−61%), as specialist schools were amalgamated to create school communities, broad-based combined schools offering most or all types of secondary education. The reduction in the number of schools was smallest in the primary education sector (−21%). The fall in the number of higher education establishments (−38%) was due entirely to a reduction in the number of universities of applied sciences (higher professional education).

The total number of pupils and students increased over the same period by 14%. The biggest increase was in higher education, and especially higher professional education
The number of pupils at special primary schools reduced, while the number in special secondary education increased. Overall, the number of primary school pupils increased by 11% between 1990 and 2010. The total number of pupils in secondary schools remained roughly unchanged over the same period, while the number in senior secondary vocational education rose by 15%.

3.2 Characteristics and achievements of the Dutch education system

Schools and other education institutes in the Netherlands have a relatively high degree of autonomy. In reality, two opposing developments have occurred in this regard over the last 20 years: schools have seen their administrative autonomy increase, whereas educationally, higher standards have been imposed in recent years and the supervision of individual schools has been stepped up. Formal responsibility for education in the Netherlands lies with school boards. These boards can delegate decision-making to school heads, but can also restrict the autonomy of school heads and teachers.

Virtually all countries have forms of special education alongside the mainstream schools. However, countries differ in their definition of the categories of pupils classed as having special needs. The definition of separate facilities also varies. In the Scandinavian countries, pupils are included in mainstream education as far as possible; by contrast, the Netherlands and Germany have a long tradition of separate special education facilities.

The first selection moment in Dutch education occurs on the transition from primary to secondary school. This takes place at a relatively young age (12 years); in many other countries this happens only later (16 years). In Germany, by contrast, selection takes place even earlier than in the Netherlands (at age 10). This early selection has been the topic of heated debate more than once in recent decades.

The senior levels of Dutch secondary education incorporate both general education (the upper streams of senior general secondary/pre-university education (havo/vwo) and a large senior secondary vocational education sector (mbo). In 2010, there were twice as many students in mbo than in the upper streams of havo and vwo. Senior secondary vocational education is focused primarily on the jobs market, whereas havo and vwo students are prepared for participation in higher education (higher professional and university).

The Netherlands is by no means unique in having a substantial share of students in senior secondary vocational education, but does fall outside the general pattern with its long (four-year) middle management programmes.

The Dutch education system is not only highly differentiated and selective, but also has a strong vocational focus. Several studies have suggested that this can adversely affect the opportunities of pupils from lower social milieus, but the data also show that Dutch pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds perform relatively well. Options such as accumulating qualifications evidently help compensate for the disadvantage of the strong vocational focus and selectivity.

The Dutch education system also scores highly when it comes to autonomy; it consists largely of privately run but publicly funded schools and therefore offers a substantial amount of competition and freedom of choice. The use of universal national
examinations and tests is another salient feature of the Dutch system. Research suggests that all these characteristics in principle contribute to educational quality and achievements. On the other hand, they can impede the opportunities of pupils from more disadvantaged social backgrounds.

The strong vocational focus of the Dutch education system appears to impact on its performance in the area of active citizenship. On the other hand, the labour market opportunities for school-leavers in systems with a strong vocational emphasis are better than in more integrated and predominantly general education systems.

For a long time, the Netherlands was known as a country which achieves relatively high educational performance with relatively low government investments in education. Substantial additional resources have been invested in recent years in improving the opportunities of special needs pupils and socially disadvantaged pupils. It is unclear to what extent these additional resources have actually led to improved results in terms of educational achievement, attainment and labour market opportunities; one disadvantage of the fairly egalitarian Dutch system is that it produces relatively few outstanding pupils and students.

All in all, there are a fair number of inherent tensions within the Dutch system. Accessibility (equal opportunities), quality (standards, excellence) and efficiency (efficient programmes, high success rates) are difficult to achieve simultaneously. Increasing accessibility combined with raising success rates generally leads to a fall in quality, while raising quality (in terms of standards) combined with an increase in efficiency (in terms of success rates) can quickly put pressure on accessibility.

4. Developments in the political and administrative landscape

4.1 Political developments

Education policy expresses the value preferences of the political persuasions which make up the coalition government at any given time. Since the Second World War, three value systems have dominated in the Netherlands: social democracy, Christian democracy and liberalism. In the period 1990-2010, the Netherlands was governed by four types of coalition based on the above political persuasions:

– Christian democratic/social democratic (1989-1994 and 2007-2010);
– social democratic/liberal (1994-1998 and 1998-2002);
– Christian democratic/liberal (2002-2003; 2003-2006; 2006-2007);
– liberal/Christian democratic (since October 2010).

Changes of coalition are accompanied by differences in political/administrative views on education policy. Those differences relate mainly to views about the role of the government in education, the importance that is attached to Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution and the relationship between centralised and decentralised (functionally or territorially) education policy. In addition, those of a liberal persuasion, for example, hold different views on equal opportunities from social democrats.
The policy proposals as set out in successive coalition agreements bear testimony not only to changes in the economic and social context, but also to shifts in the political makeup of the coalitions. This is clear from the Coalition Agreements produced by the eight governments which were in office between 1990 and 2010.

The role of government ministers
If the content of the Coalition Agreement determines the course and thus the political scope for policy on controversial topics, it is ministers who flesh out the details of that scope. In two of the eight governments in the period studied here – the third government under Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers (1989-1994) and the first government led by Wim Kok (1994-1998) – the ministers and state secretaries for education came from the same party, namely the Labour Party (PvdA). Before that time, education ministers and state secretaries had come from different political parties, so that the strongly value-driven and politically sensitive area that is education had built-in checks and balances. The topics on which and the way in which new policy was prepared, defended and implemented also depend on the individual ministers and state secretaries. There is an important distinction in how active or passive a stance these politicians adopt. Ministers who prefer an active policy, such as Jo Ritzen (Labour), sometimes force through their policy ideals against the wishes of those working in the field. By contrast, ministers with a less forceful approach, such as Maria van der Hoeven (Christian Democratic Union, CDA), first listen to those in the field and then translate what they hear into national policy.

The role of Parliament
As a co-legislator, the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament is often involved right from the outset in the substantive aspects of policy development. As a result, Mps gradually become more and more committed, and sometimes find it difficult to draw back from earlier standpoints further down the line. An example is the decision-making process on the reform of the second phase of senior general secondary (havo) and pre-university education (vwo) (proposals for educational profiles and independent study centres). The position and reputation of Parliament has come under pressure due to the generally scant attention it pays to the practicability of the proposed policies. The high turnover of Mps also does nothing to foster consistency within education policy. The same applies for the way in which Mps, in exercising their task of scrutinising legislation, respond on a virtually daily basis to newspaper reports, TV programmes or research which highlights particular problems or incidents. The constant stream of critical questions leads to knee-jerk politics and to new policy that is sometimes diametrically opposed to policy pursued earlier.

4.2 Administrative changes
From upscaling operations to a merger test
Since the 1980s, the Dutch government has embarked on one or more upscaling operations in virtually every sector of education. The main interventions in senior secondary vocational (mbo) and higher professional education (hbo) entailed mergers between
education establishments. In the primary and secondary education sectors, institutional upscaling was accompanied by administrative upscaling (more schools governed by a single board). These increases in scale have led to considerable unrest and resistance in recent years, especially among teachers, who after these mergers were left with a management which was remote from their school and which simply handed down all manner of rules. At political level, there were increasing calls to bring back the human scale into education. Recent legislation has stipulated that a test must first be carried out before a merger can take place to assess whether there is sufficient support for the merger and to ensure that it will not jeopardise freedom of choice.

Market forces in education
The first proposal for the introduction of a system of student vouchers (demand-driven approach) was introduced in the 1980s. The idea was that this would increase competition between education establishments and therefore improve educational quality. The proposal aroused a great deal of resistance from universities of applied sciences and universities, and was not implemented. Later proposals for individual vouchers also got nowhere. Market forces manifest themselves mainly through competition, preferably by offering courses to more talented pupils (secondary education) or launching new programmes whose titles match the ambitions of future students (senior secondary vocational, higher professional education).

Deregulation and increased autonomy versus safeguarding the public interest
The drive for decentralisation, deregulation and increased autonomy were embraced by all governments during the last 20 years. Sometimes the focus was on territorial decentralisation (transfer of powers to local authorities), but more often the thrust was functional decentralisation (transfer of powers to school and governing boards). However, with a view to ensuring educational quality, more recently limits have been set to this autonomy. For example, a statutory regulation was introduced prescribing reference standards for arithmetic and language, as well as legislation giving the government the power to intervene in the case of serious or lasting deficiencies in educational performance.

5. Changes in the policy arena

5.1 Policy preparation

The ministry
A host of reorganisations have taken place in the Dutch education ministry over the last 20 years. One result of all these changes has been a sharp reduction in the substantive expertise of the civil servants within the ministry. A guideline was published in 1998 banning contact between civil servants and MPs. Helping to create a positive image has been an important element in the political and official advisory activities in recent years. Media strategists, press officers and communications officers have been
appointed in order to improve the presentation of policy in the media. The gaps which arose as a result of the reduced substantive expertise (and the decline in the number of advisory bodies) have largely been filled in recent years by buying in external advice and appointing temporary committees; between 1995 and 2005, the number of committees appointed by the Ministry of Education far exceeded that of other ministries.

The consultative structure

The consultative structure has changed radically over the last 20 years. In the early 1990s, the main consultative forum for discussions with educational organisations was the Central Committee for Educational Consultation (Centrale Commissie voor Onderwijsoverleg – ccoo), created in 1972, in which the national umbrella organisations of the four main educational ‘pillars’ in the Netherlands (Roman Catholic, Protestant, state and general private education) were represented. Ministers and state secretaries were highly dependent on the support of this Committee. The first Dutch government without the Christian Democrats (referred to as the ‘purple’ government because of its combination of the ‘red’ of Labour (PvdA) and of the ‘blue’ of the centre-right liberals (VVD)) changed the consultative structure. Henceforth, joint discussions were no longer held with the pillarised umbrella organisations; instead, separate discussions were held with the individual stakeholder organisations (organisations of school boards, school heads, staff, parents and pupils).

For primary and secondary education, this consultation took place from 1995 in the Primary and Secondary Education Platform (Onderwijsoverleg Primair en Voortgezet Onderwijs – opvo). Separate consultation forums were created for the vocational training and adult education and higher education sectors, in which only the governing bodies participated. Separate consultations were held with student advocacy organisations. The consultative structure in 2010 was much less institutionalised than in the early 1990s. The policy-building process has become increasingly interactive in recent years: the government no longer holds talks only with (educational) organisations, but also consults with external experts and individual stakeholders.

Changes in the role of the Inspectorate of Education

In 1990 the Dutch Inspectorate of the Education was still part of the Ministry of Education. Following criticism of the overly close relationship between the two, the Inspectorate was separated from the Ministry in 1993, both organisationally and administratively.

In 1997, the Dutch newspaper Trouw published a national overview of the achievements of all secondary schools in the Netherlands, using data from the Inspectorate. This publication dispelled the myth that all schools are equal and perform equally well. In response to the article, the Ministry decided that the Inspectorate would henceforth publish its data on the quality of individual schools.

During the same period, the trend towards deregulation and greater school autonomy resulted in growing attention for educational quality and monitoring. The Inspectorate began searching for new working methods and criteria. The supervisory role of the Inspectorate had two functions: to encourage schools to develop their own qual-
ity policy and quality assurance systems and to ensure basic quality standards in every school. These principles were incorporated in the 2002 Education Supervision Act (Wet op het onderwijstoezicht).

In the run-up to the introduction of the new Act, the Education Council of the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad) put forward several fundamental objections. The Council felt that the Inspectorate’s supervisory task (with regard to the legally stipulated educational standards) should remain the most important focus, and had great difficulties with the non-statutorily established educational quality standards, which were at odds freedom of education provision (Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution); the then chairman of the Education Council would later remark that central government had abandoned schools at the front door in its role as legislator, only to re-enter via the back door in its role as supervisor, with new quality standards. The Parliamentary committee of inquiry which investigated the reforms in secondary education was highly critical in its 2008 report of the government interference in the ‘how’ of education.

The new government which took office in 2007 proposed a new method of supervision based on the principle of ‘earned trust”: education establishments which performed well would be subject to less supervision. Since 2009, the Inspectorate has concentrated its efforts mainly on (very) poorly performing schools.

Trends in education policy advice
The Education Council of the Netherlands (established in 1919) was for a long time the most important – and since 1997 has been the only – permanent advisory body to the government on education.

In the 1980s there were no fewer than 49 official advisory bodies in the Netherlands active in the field of education. A review of the entire advisory system was initiated in the 1990s, leading to a reduction in the number of advisory councils and committees to 23. The Education Council not only saw its brief change in 1997, but also its composition. The emphasis shifted from reactive advisory reports based on legislative proposals to providing outline advice at an early stage of policy development, in other words before there were any concrete policy proposals on the table but where there was a (perceived) problem which required a solution. Since then, the Education Council has published regular proactive or strategic policy advisory reports. Whereas the Council comprised around 85 members in 1996, representing the many organisations from the educational field, in 2010 the it was made up of 12 independent expert members, none of them representing any interest groups.

5.2 Changes in the position and influence of the various organisations in the education field

Educational organisations can be divided along three lines: by ideological or denominational character, by structure and by education sector. The orientation or denominational aspects play a role mainly in the formation of policy in relation to primary and secondary education. The influence of the different representative organisations (structure) varies by education sector.
The organisations of school boards (primary and secondary education) and governing boards (vocational and higher education) exert the greatest influence on education policy. After the founding of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) (successor to the Academic Council) and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad) sector organisations were also formed for the other education sectors in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century: the Vocational Training and Adult Education Council (Bve-raad), later transformed into the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad), the Dutch Council for Secondary Education (PO-raad) and the Dutch Council for Primary Education (PO-raad). These councils represent their members vis-à-vis the government, Parliament, public authorities and civil-society organisations, as well as fulfilling the role of employers within their respective education sectors.

As with the trade union federations, employee organisations (teaching and other staff) pooled their strengths. In 1997, the General Union of Teaching Staff (ABOP) and the Netherlands Association of Teachers (NGL) merged to form the General Teaching Union (AOB). The Better Education in the Netherlands Association (BON) was founded in 2006, representing mainly grade-one teachers (with a university degree). There was a similar pooling of strengths in the Protestant confessional segment. Teachers do not have a professional association in the Netherlands, and the trade unions have accordingly begun focusing in recent years on the quality of the teaching profession, through the Foundation for the Professional Quality of Teachers (SBV), reformed in 2011 to create the Education Co-operative (Onderwijscoöperatie).

Parents’ organisations are still organised along ideological or denominational lines, with each educational ‘pillar’ having its own organisation. The Balans association represents the interests of parents of children with developmental or behavioural difficulties. The pupil organisations LAKS (secondary education) and JOB (senior secondary vocational education) had existed for 25 and 10 years, respectively in 2009. The student organisations LSVB and ISO (higher education) each celebrated their 25th anniversaries in 2008.

Over the last 20 years, the umbrella organisations grouped around specific denominations or ideologies (the old ‘pillarisation’ system) have lost most of their influence over education policy. Where they still exist, they focus mainly on issues relating to the identity of the schools within their ‘pillar’ (Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution). The sector organisations, as representatives of school boards, are currently far and away the most important discussion partners for the government.

The influence of the teaching trade unions has declined in recent years. Negotiations on terms of employment have been devolved to the individual education sectors, robbing the trade unions of an important line of influence to government. The influence of parents is limited because of their fragmented organisation. Moreover, the organisations that represent them sometimes seem to be more concerned with the importance of their ideology or pillar than with the interests of the parents. The influence of pupil and student organisations has increased in recent years. In 2007 the three main organisations LAKS, JOB and LSVB sent a joint letter to the then State
Secretary for Education in which, under the title ‘We want to learn: give us the chance’, they demanded more lessons and better teaching. The letter prompted a Parliamentary inquiry on educational reform which was adopted by Parliament in that same year.

5.3 Growing influence of external actors

The influence on education policy of employers’ and employees’ representatives (the ‘social partners’) in general, and of employers’ organisations in particular, has increased markedly over the last 20 years. Organisations such as the Association of National Centres of Expertise on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (Colo) (qualifications structure in senior secondary vocational education), the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (advice on education policy) and the Labour Foundation (issuing standpoints) influence education policy at the level of the sector, branch or professional field as well as at national level.

The influence of international organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has also grown substantially in recent years. Their influence is indirect, via arrangements at European level (e.g. the Lisbon targets) and via publications such as the annual report Education at a Glance, which compares the performance of the education systems of more than 30 industrialised countries. Governments are generally highly sensitive to the position of their country on the international performance ladder, and international benchmarks and comparative studies have had a clear impact on education policy since the beginning of this century.

The influence of the media has also increased. Their reports are predominantly negative (good news is not news), and this imbues people outside education with a sense that everything is going wrong in education. By contrast, research shows time and again that parents are generally reasonably satisfied with the education received by their children.

6. Agenda-building and policy formulation in relation to a number of system characteristics

6.1 Agenda-building

Policy processes generally begin with the placing of a specific problem on the agenda. All manner of factors play a role in the selection of topics which ultimately find their way on to the policy agenda: the media attention it is attracting or the public support for a different way of addressing it. Four models are used in this study to explain why some wishes and problems make it on to the agenda and others do not:

– the gulf model: the seriousness of the problem determines the attention it receives from policymakers.

– the barrier model: in this model it is the relative magnitude of a problem compared with other problems which is decisive the media play an important role here;

– the impetus model: an event or incident leads to a sudden increase in attention for a particular problem; this creates an opportunity (policy window) for placing the
problem on the agenda where this was not possible before. It is then up to policymakers to seize this opportunity;
– the relative attention model: the decisive factor in this model is how long the problem has been neglected and to what extent it has been suppressed in the preceding period. Attention for problems is culturally determined and cyclical in nature. The selection of problems is based on a consensus between political schools of thought.

The concluding chapter of this report (Chapter 11) indicates how good these models are at explaining the extent to which the four system characteristics and the associated topics are placed on the policy agenda.

Systemic problems
New policy generally arises as a response to problems that have occurred in the education system. Three types of systemic problem are distinguished in this study:
– transitional and matching problems;
– discrepancies between supply and demand;
– undesirable developments in or outcomes of the system.

Some problems prove particularly stubborn (such as the growth in special education), while others are latent (discrepancy between supply and demand) or appear on the policy agenda only occasionally (educational quality).

6.2 Policy-building: the arena model as a descriptive framework

Four models are often used in analysing policy processes:
– the linear model, in which policy is broken down into successive phases of policy preparation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation;
– the systemic model, in which wishes and problems from society or the field (input) are converted by the political system (throughput) into different societal outcomes (output);
– the incrementalist model, which is characterised by a series of small changes; also referred to as ‘muddling through’;
– the arena model, in which the policy-building process develops in one section of society which has a degree of autonomy compared to the rest. As well as the government, all manner of other actors also operate in this arena, albeit usually in different phases of the policy-building process.

The arena model provides the best descriptive framework given the complexity of the policy processes which took place in the education sector between 1990 and 2010. The two latter models (the incrementalist model and the arena model) are in fact not mutually exclusive; there is a great deal of muddling through within the policy arena in the event of conflicts of interest and differences of opinion, as the policy-building processes in the following chapters show.
7. Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution

Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution not only establishes government responsibility for education (basic social right), but also establishes a traditional basic right in the sense of freedom of education without government interference. In the public debate, Article 23 is associated primarily with this ‘freedom of education’. The Article has appeared on the political agenda several times in the last 20 years. Four topics are discussed here in this regard, two of them concerned with ideological freedom and freedom to found schools (orientation-free planning and Islamic schools), and two with the freedom of organisation (global, non-specific instructional objectives in primary education and junior secondary education and the role of the Inspectorate with regard to teaching methods).

7.1 The founding of new schools: orientation-free planning and Islamic schools

‘ Desired education’ and orientation-free planning

Dutch MPs from the non-confessional parties tabled a motion in 1993 inviting the government to develop a proposal which would enable the schools network to provide a better match for the changing preferences of parents. The tabling of the motion was prompted by the upscaling operation in primary education (Toerusting en bereikbaarheid). The motion argued that setting the standards for founding new schools too high would make founding a new school virtually impossible. The schools network, which despite the process of separation from the church and secularisation still consisted largely (two-thirds) of privately run confessional schools, would therefore become effectively fossilised. A committee was first installed in response to the motion, following which the Education Council was asked to produce an advisory report. The Council came up with a proposal to introduce a system of ‘orientation-free planning’, in which religion or ideology would no longer play a role in the funding process when a new school was founded or where an existing school changed its ideological or religious orientation. In the subsequent years, several policy documents were published containing specific proposals for improving the match between school identity and parental preferences. However, putting those proposals into practice proved not to be a simple matter. Despite the more stringent standards for founding new schools, new schools were nonetheless still being founded around the turn of the century. Moreover, research showed that the discrepancy between the school supply and parental demand was not very great in the primary and secondary sector. Ultimately, the then education minister (a Christian Democrat) announced in 2004 that a bill would not be tabled in Parliament after all. A policy process that had lasted 11 years thus ultimately led nowhere.

Islamic schools

The first two Islamic schools were founded in the Netherlands in 1988. In the years thereafter, the number grew to 43 primary schools (with over 9,300 pupils, just under half a percent of the total number of primary school pupils in the Netherlands and 6% of the total number of Muslim children) and two secondary schools in 2010. In founding these schools, the Muslim community used the rights set out in the Dutch Constitution. Other
religious and ideological groups (e.g. Hindustanis) had also used this same right, as had the Dutch Orthodox Protestant community and the anthroposophists. During the 1990s, the social climate in relation to Islamic schools deteriorated. There were indications that foreign powers were intervening in Islamic education and that the quality of teaching and the educational climate at Islamic schools was lacking. In 2003, the Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali (centre-right VVD party) tabled a motion calling for a ban on the founding of new Islamic schools. In order to circumvent the sensitivities in relation to Article 23, the main argument in her motion was the concentration of disadvantage in Islamic schools. The then education minister (the Christian Democrat Maria van der Hoeven) advised against the motion, however, arguing that the principle of freedom of education offered no scope for making an exception of one type of education. The motion was not adopted.

Islamic education continued to exercise minds in the following years. Following the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, threats were made against Islamic schools and mosques. A few years later reports began to appear about financial fraud at Islamic schools. All the political and public debate ultimately led to two new pieces of legislation: first, a statutory ruling promoting active citizenship and social integration, which offers the Inspectorate the ability to intensify its supervision where the education provided is in conflict with the basic values of a constitutional democracy; and second the Good Education, Good Governance Act (Wet goed onderwijs, goed bestuur), which enables the government to intervene in cases of administrative mismanagement.

7.2 Freedom of organisation: educational content and teaching methods

The agenda-building in relation to the last two topics cited above concerned freedom of organisation (educational content and teaching methods). The Education Council, the Inspectorate for Education, the Parliamentary committee of inquiry investigating secondary education reform (the Dijsselbloem Committee), representatives of (confessional) private education and their Parliamentary counterparts (the confessional parties) were the main policy actors in relation to this topic.

Educational content

The content of primary education (and the first years of secondary education), sometimes referred to since 2008 as the ‘what’ of education, is laid down in ‘general instructional objectives’. These are much less specific than the attainment targets developed at the end of the 1980s, which according to a committee of experts were at odds with the freedom of education and of organisation.

The Education Council had major reservations regarding these general objectives, fearing that their broad formulation offered far too little structure for teaching practice. In 1997, the Education Council observed that there were wide differences in the degree to which primary schools were achieving their instructional objectives. Many pupils left primary school with significant learning disadvantages, causing serious problems in their further school careers. According to the Council, adopting clear ‘learning standards’ (proficiency levels) could offer a solution. The then education minister Jo Ritzen
(Labour), asked the Education Council to work up these learning standards into detailed proposals. The requested advisory report appeared in 1999. The Council was to repeat its call for learning standards at three levels and at three moments in the school career, which moreover covered only a limited part of the general instructional objectives (only those that were crucial for the school career), several times to no effect. Maria van der Hoeven, the Christian Democrat education minister in the first three governments under Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, was not interested. It was only after a sharp increase in the number of complaints about the lack of basic skills in arithmetic and language, and after international comparative research had supported claims that the arithmetic skills of Dutch primary school pupils had declined, that the education ministers in the fourth Balkenende government finally took the initiative to allow reference standards to be developed for arithmetic and language at different moments in the school career of primary school pupils, and since August 2010 primary, secondary and senior secondary vocational schools have been required by law to apply a reference framework for language and arithmetic. For the time being, this requirement applies only to school input, with no testing or evaluation of outcomes.

Teaching methods

The teaching methods used in schools, sometimes referred to since 2008 as the ‘how’ of education, also gave rise to a discussion about Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution. The Inspectorate for Education began looking for new working methods and criteria in the second half of the 1990s, but found that criteria and standards for assessing individual schools could not be derived directly from the law. Moreover, when the Education Supervision Act was introduced in 2002, the Inspectorate was given the additional task of promoting educational quality in schools. However, Article 23 of the Constitution makes no mention of the term ‘quality’, but refers only to ‘standards’. Examples of these standards are the number of teaching hours and teacher qualifications. In the context of its new incentivising supervisory task, however, the Inspectorate not only looked at whether a school met the standards set by law, but also assessed schools on other quality criteria, such as the teaching methods used (e.g. interactive teaching programmes). The Education Council opposed these moves from the outset. However, the then education minister, Loek Hermans (vvd), believed that the system of standards offered insufficient guarantees of ‘good education’. A compromise was formulated. Unlike with the standards, the Inspectorate’s views on the additional quality aspects in the supervisory framework would not result in ministerial sanctions. Despite this, the Inspectorate’s quality aspects did have a normative effect on schools, among other things because all Inspectorate data were made public at the end of the 1990s.

2008 saw the publication of the Parliamentary committee of inquiry’s report on reforms in secondary education. The committee argued that the government had begun interfering far too much in teaching methods (citing the ‘independent study centres’ as an example) and called for a clear demarcation of responsibilities. The committee argued that the government should concern itself with the ‘what’ of education: educational content in the form of general instructional objectives, attainment targets or examination standards. The ‘how’ of education – the organisation and structuring of teaching
and the teaching methods used – should be the sole preserve of schools. The distinction between the ‘what’ and ‘how’ has been an important element in education policy since then. Today, schools are assessed primarily on the basis of educational outcomes (results).

8. The relationship between mainstream and special education

The relationship between mainstream primary and secondary education and special education, with its 15 different school types, first appeared on the political agenda in the mid-1970s (in the Contours Report). The referral of increasing numbers of pupils to separate schools offering special needs education was regarded as a socially undesirable trend. Reference was often made in this regard to other countries, e.g. in Scandinavia, where all children went to the same school regardless of their disabilities or limitations. In the 1980s, economic considerations were also frequently used as an argument against the growth of special education. Attempts to curb the strong growth and rising costs of special education failed to produce the desired effect, however.

8.1 The Going to School Together policy

The relationship between mainstream and special education was placed on the policy agenda in 1990, shortly after the new Minister and State Secretary, Jo Ritzen and Jacques Wallage, respectively (both Labour), assumed office. Both politicians believed that the systematic division between mainstream and special education was the biggest cause of the strong growth in special education, and one that the trend had to be broken under the motto ‘Going to School Together’ (‘weer samen naar school’). Cooperative networks of primary and special school boards were formed which, together with a new funding structure (budget funding), were intended to bring an end to the rising participation in and costs of special education. The Going to School Together policy was focused mainly on special provisions for children with a relatively mild impairments, namely schools for children with learning and behavioural difficulties (LOM-schools) and schools for children with moderate learning difficulties (MLK-schools). These were also the schools to which the vast majority of special needs pupils went. The two school types were merged in 1998 to create a new school type within the mainstream structure, known as special primary schools.

Some years later, the then State Secretary for Education, Tineke Netelenbos (Labour) also placed the Going to School Together policy on the agenda for secondary education. The argument here was that placing students in special schools damaged their future prospects. Only 5% of students in special secondary schools obtained a qualification, and most of them ended up in sheltered employment or faced a life on benefits. As with primary education, two school types (LOM and MLK) were integrated into the mainstream system; secondary schools for children with learning and behavioural difficulties (LOM) were merged with individual pre-vocational education to create learning support programmes (Lwoo) within mainstream pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), while
secondary schools for children with moderate learning difficulties (MLK) were transformed into practical training (pro) programmes. During the preparation of the Going to School Together policy, the Ministry of Education set a clear direction. After the policy had been implemented (in around 2002), by contrast, developments were largely left to the education field itself. Although mainstream primary schools had improved pupil care over the years (becoming more adept at identifying care needs), teaching in the classroom improved only marginally. According to the Netherlands Court of Audit (2005), the government was insufficiently clear about what was expected from primary schools and the cooperative networks in terms of providing pupil care, and where the limits lay of the ‘customised care’ to be offered by schools. In 2010, the Court of Audit again observed that the care policy of schools and cooperative networks had not been systematically evaluated and that it was entirely unclear whether the extra funding for the care policy (EUR 2.2 billion) was being spent effectively and efficiently. The success of policy largely depends on the funding method. Budget funding led to a sharp reduction in participation in special primary education, though this was accompanied by increasing participation in other areas of special education (the ‘waterbed effect’). Participation in learning support programmes (lwoo) grew strongly between 2002 and 2007, before softening thereafter. The funding of learning support programmes is open-ended, and both primary and secondary schools have a financial interest in being assigned pupils with learning support needs.

8.2 Personal budgets

The context in which the personal budget system, sometimes also called the ‘rucksack’ because the funding moves with the pupil, was placed on the agenda was different from that in which the Going to School Together policy arose. It became ever clearer during the 1990s that parents did not want to send their intellectually and/or physically disabled children to a special school located a long way from home, but would rather send them to an ordinary primary school in the local neighbourhood. This view was expressed especially forcefully by parents of children with Downs syndrome. The Rispens Committee (1995) argued that parents should not only be given freedom to choose between a special or mainstream school for their child, but should also have more of a say in the content of the extra support. A demand-driven approach, in the form of a personal budget for each child, would lead to more customisation, the Committee argued. These calls for a more demand-driven approach fitted into a broader context: a year earlier, during a UNESCO conference in Salamanca, a declaration had been adopted calling on governments to adopt appropriate education as a policy principle, while a personal budget system was introduced in the care sector in 1996. Working up the policy proposals into practical measures presented considerable difficulties, however, especially as regards the independent assessment system. Parliament was very hesitant regarding the budgetary consequences of this system, since it was in principle open-ended (children assessed with special needs had to be admitted), and the danger of a ‘magnet effect’ was definitely not illusory.
As part of the personal budget system, the 328 special secondary schools in the Netherlands were divided into four clusters and grouped in regional expertise centres. This too created numerous problems, partly in respect of religious beliefs and freedom of education (Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution). The system of personal budgets was finally introduced in 2003. Research in 2008 showed that the introduction of assessment criteria for the personal budget had led to a situation where a relatively large group of pupils who were already attending mainstream schools, mainly children with ADHD or autistic disorders, were eligible for a personal budget. The number of pupils receiving ambulatory support (a ‘rucksack’) increased sharply following introduction of the personal budget, from 11,000 in 2003 to 39,000 in 2009. The growth was particularly strong in secondary education.

8.3 Appropriate education

In 2005, the then education minister Maria van der Hoeven (CDA) acknowledged for the first time that there were major problems in the structure that had evolved for children with special needs: the division of responsibilities was complex and unclear, the assessment system had spawned an enormous bureaucracy and parents occasionally fell foul of school admissions policies. And last but not least, participation in special education was growing enormously and the costs were rising steeply. Schools would have to be given the freedom – and the responsibility – to develop inclusive education arrangements themselves. The legislator would have to lay down the responsibility of school boards clearly in the form of a duty of care. In the event, however, the fall of the third Balkenende government meant that the detailed proposals were not translated into action.

The fourth government led by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, with Sharon Dijksma (Labour) and Marja van Bijsterveldt (Christian Democrats) as state secretaries with responsibility for primary and secondary education, respectively, put forward new proposals in 2007, in which the cooperative networks played an important role and in which the personal budget system and special secondary education were funded on the basis of budget funding. A national evaluation and advisory committee on appropriate education (the ecpo committee) was also installed, which in 2009 reported that appropriate education was still primarily an administrative issue which was very remote from the everyday reality of the school and the classroom. Both state secretaries subsequently concluded that a complete overhaul of appropriate education (policy) was needed. A national frame of reference needed to be drawn up which would support the transformation from structure to content. The sector organisations (Council for Primary Education and Council for Secondary Education) were given responsibility for developing this national frame of reference. The duty of care for school boards was once again brought to prominence. The ‘rucksack’ would disappear, and the funding used for it would be allocated to the cooperative networks and be based on 2008 spending levels. This new approach was to be implemented by 2012.

The ecpo committee felt the position and role of the government in the plans to be extremely unclear. For example, no precise definition had been given of ‘duty of care’ or
of the obligations that would stem from it for school boards, and the development of the
frame of reference was being left entirely to the field (in other words, the sector coun-
cils). However, the government remained responsible for the supply, quality, accessibil-
ity and supervision of education. After the fall of the fourth Balkenende government,
in February 2010, the legislation intended to open the way for the proposed change of
course was declared controversial by Parliament.
In November 2010 Van Bijsterveldt, who had been promoted to a minister in the newly
appointed government under Prime Minister Mark Rutte, announced both a new course
for appropriate education and spending cuts totalling €UR 300 million.

The development of the relationship between mainstream and special education be-
tween 1990 and 2010 produces a mixed picture. In 2010, more children with relatively
mild special needs, who in the past would have been sent to special schools, were
attending mainstream or special primary schools. The number of pupils assessed as
having special needs in mainstream secondary education increased spectacularly over
the period studied. However, pupils in learning support programmes today obtain a
school qualification more often than their predecessors in special secondary schools.
The number of pupils in much more expensive special secondary education has also
increased sharply over the last 20 years, especially the number of young people with
behavioural problems aged 12 years and upwards.
Following the introduction of the new care structure for children with special needs and
new funding systems which in many cases increased rather than reducing the growth
in participation, the government largely left the development of policy to the education
field itself. A combination of conflicts of interest (between school boards within coopera-
tive networks), strategic behaviour (on the part of schools and parents) and reticence to
act (on the part of teachers), the number of pupils receiving special education provision
(in mainstream schools or special education facilities) merely continued to increase. The
government has not managed to reverse this trend over the last 20 years.

9. Early selection on transition from primary to secondary education

9.1 Basic education and the creation of (broad) school communities

During the negotiations on the Coalition Agreement which formed the basis for the
third government under Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers (1989-1994), the Labour Party (PvdA) and Christian Democrats (cDA) reached agreement on a detailed proposal for a
common general education programme at the same level for all students in the early
years of secondary school (basic education) and on the creation of (broad-based) school
communities (preferably offering both general secondary/pre-university and secondary
vocational education). The intention was that, whilst retaining the existing secondary
education structure, this would delay the moment at which students had to choose their
future studies and careers.
The then State Secretary for Education, Jacques Wallage (Labour) and his officials at
the Ministry developed the plans further. A process management team was set to work
paving the way for the introduction of basic education. However, opinions in the educational and political field were still sharply divided, especially between the Labour Party (PvdA), which wanted to end the distinction between junior vocational education and general secondary education by introducing a common general programme in junior secondary education, and the liberal People’s Party the Freedom and Democracy (vvd), which wanted to maintain the differentiated system, arguing that children simply differ widely in their interests and abilities.

Under pressure from the Christian Democrats (CDA), the detailed attainment targets proposed earlier were replaced by general instructional objectives. During the debate in the Upper House of the bill to introduce basic education and create broad-based school communities, the criteria for scrapping specialist grammar schools (gymnasia) and senior general secondary schools were relaxed temporarily under pressure from the CDA and vvd parties. The biggest teachers’ union, ABOP (Algemene Bond van Onderwijzend Personeel), supported the principle of basic education; by contrast, the NGL union (Nederlands Genootschap van Leraren) was implacably opposed to it. The bill was passed in 1992; in effect, basic education and the creation of broad-based school communities had been forced through by the Coalition Agreement.

From 1993 onwards, basic education was introduced without much policy input, which in practice meant that schools did only what they were legally obliged to do. The envisaged new teaching methods (application, skills, cohesion) failed to get off the ground. An evaluation in 1999 showed that the programme was not only much too overloaded, but also too general, too difficult for pupils in pre-vocational education and too easy for pre-university students. The evaluation led to a number of changes, replacement of the negatively charged term ‘basic education’ (basisvorming) with the more neutral’ junior secondary education’ (onderbouw) (in 2003) and ultimately (in 2006) to a marked reduction in the number of instructional objectives and to greater freedom for schools to structure their programmes as they saw fit.

Today, in 2011, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the policy of introducing a uniform general basic education and creating broad-based school communities, which was intended to delay the moment of selection, actually achieved the opposite of what was intended. Selection on the transition from primary to secondary education (based on the centralised tests administered by the National Institute for Educational Measurement (Cito)) is today much stricter than before the introduction of basic education. The envisaged deferral of the moment at which students have to choose their future study and career (by removing the vocational subjects from secondary education) has not been achieved. On the contrary, in 2007 a trend began towards the creation of specialist Technology programmes at pre-vocational secondary (vmbo) level in which students begin technical vocational classes right from the first school year. The first Care classes also began in 2010, and the number of specialist courses at vmbo level has now reached around 60.
9.2 Early selection back on the agenda

In 2008 the then Minister of Education, Ronald Plasterk (Labour) placed the issue of early selection on the agenda once again. In an outline of the state of affairs midway through the government term, entitled Midterm review ‘het beste onderwijs’ (‘Mid-term review: ‘the best education’), he raised the question, partly in the light of international comparative research (OECD), of whether the Dutch education system was not forcing young people to choose too early. He referred in the document to the national ambition of creating a labour force in which 50% were higher education graduates. However, the road to achieving that ambition (via the vocational route) is not only long, including for young people with disadvantages, but also suffers from high dropout rates.

In an advisory report published in 2010, the Education Council stated that it did not support mandatory deferral of selection for everyone, but was in favour of improvements to the present system, for example in relation to the modest achievements of the highest performing group of pupils and the poorer opportunities for pupils from lower social milieus. With regard to this latter problem, the Council pointed to the importance of eliminating learning disadvantage in primary school, the possibility of creating more transitional classes from junior to senior general secondary education (mavo/havo), of improving the transfer opportunities and ability to combine qualifications, of a less strict segregation between general and vocational education at junior and senior secondary level, and of encouraging experiments with junior classes.

Deferring the moment of selection was not an option for the Rutte government which took office in October 2010. Eliminating disadvantage (reference standards, preschool and early-school education, bridging classes) and improving the opportunities for transferring between courses and combining qualifications are and remain longer-standing objectives of Dutch education policy.

The Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) has traditionally been the most passionate advocate of deferring selection. In the 1970s and 80s the Christian parties, which later amalgamated to form the Christian Democratic Union (CDA), also lent their support to this aim. Since the problems that followed the introduction of basic education and other secondary education reforms (independent study centres, pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo)), however, the CDA has adopted a very reticent stance on system reforms. In recent years it has been mainly the OECD that has placed this topic on the agenda (e.g. in Education at a Glance).

10. The position and function of senior vocational education

The envisaged new position and function of senior secondary vocational education (mbo) was already on the agenda within the Ministry of Education in the second half of the 1980s. It was not only the ideas formulated about new administrative relations in education which played a role at that time, but also the example of community colleges in the United States and the desire to strengthen the regional links between education and the labour market.
10.1 Division of responsibilities between education and the business community

One of the first actions of Jo Ritzen (Labour) on becoming education minister in 1989 was to set up a committee – the Rauwenhoff Committee – which was charged not only with looking at senior vocational education, the apprenticeship system and the relationship between training opportunities and the labour market, but was also asked to look explicitly at the division of responsibilities between the government and the field (including the business community) and the institutional coordination between programmes. A key element in the Committee’s report, published in 1990, was ‘the independent school’: in negotiation with the business community and the authorities, vocational training colleges would be required to develop their own training programmes. This idea fitted in perfectly with the drive towards greater autonomy for education establishments as advocated in the HOAK policy document (‘Higher education: autonomy and quality’). A second recommendation concerned the standard of the basic qualification, i.e. the standard achieved after completing a two-year vocational training or apprenticeship programme. Every young person would be required to attain such a basic qualification as a minimum before making the transition to the labour market. The entire vocational training system, up to and including higher education, needed to be dualised in the Committee’s view. During the training programmes, students should also be required to spend time outside the classroom in work practice.

The division of responsibility envisaged by the minister between government and the business community immediately led to conflict with employers’ and employees’ representatives. In the draft budget for 1991, the minister had stated that the business community would contribute 150 million guilders (approximately EUR 70 million) to the costs of senior secondary vocational education (mbo). This was not well received, and was to make further discussions about the relationship between vocational training and the labour market much more difficult. Employers’ and employees’ representatives also felt that the proposed regionalisation must not undermine the national qualification structure: plumbers who had trained in the far northern province of Friesland must also be able to work in the southern province of Limburg.

10.2 Institutional development: positioning of senior vocational education (creation of regional training centres)

The ‘Key Points Memorandum on the Adult and Vocational Education Act (Kernpuntennotitie over de Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs) was published in 1993. The aim of the Act was to improve the match between the wide range of senior secondary vocational programmes (which still came under the Secondary Education Act) and the range of apprenticeship programmes and part-time vocational training programmes, as well as establishing a link with various forms of adult education. A single national qualification structure was created with two tracks, four levels and four sectors. Most programmes were placed within regional training centres (ROCs), in addition to which there were a number of agricultural training centres (AOCs) and specialist institutes (offering programmes leading to specific occupations or sectors). The intention was that the ROCs should develop
into responsive education establishments serving a wide range of target groups: not just young people (with or without qualifications), but also job-seeking adults. The ROCs were envisaged as the preferred suppliers for the regional labour market.

Although senior secondary vocational education acquired a threefold qualification structure under the new Act (vocational qualifications, transfer qualifications and citizenship qualifications), in principle it was regarded as terminal education. During his spell as an educational economist in his first government term (1989-9094) education minister Jo Ritzen had already embraced the goal of rationalising the education budget, among other things by combating the inefficiencies in education in the form of excessively long student careers (combining courses and following all kinds of meandering pathways through the education system). According to the minister, the right student needed to be placed in the right course as quickly as possible, and that could be achieved through the basic education system that had been introduced in the early 1990s. Pupils with the ability to go on to higher education would transfer to senior general secondary (havo) or pre-university education (vwo) whilst still in the basic education phase, from where they would follow a smooth academic path into higher professional education (hbo). Senior secondary vocational education (mbo) was by contrast primarily intended to prepare students for an occupation; although it was formally still possible for students to transfer from mbo to hbo, in reality this ceased to be a policy objective after the introduction of the Adult and Vocational Education Act.

10.3 Functional change: from terminal education to a pivotal role in vocational training

Around the turn of the century, opinions on the position and function of senior secondary vocational education changed. In the year 2000, the European Council (government leaders) meeting in Lisbon expressed the ambition that by 2010, Europe should be one of the most dynamic and competitive regions in the world. This ‘Lisbon Strategy’ would it was hoped lead to the further development of the knowledge economy and to a strengthening of social cohesion.

A Dutch advisory report on progression through the vocational training system (Doorstroomagenda Beroepsonderwijs) was published in 2001 at the request of education minister Loek Hermans (liberal vvd), intended to improve the opportunities for progressing through and within the vocational training system – from pre-vocational (vmbo) to senior secondary vocational (mbo), within senior secondary vocational education and from senior secondary vocational to higher professional education (hbo). Strengthening the vocational training system became an important policy theme in the subsequent years, and this was further reinforced in later policy documents, such as Koers Bvz (‘Setting a course for Vocational Training and Adult Education) (2004) and Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan 2004 (‘Higher Education and Research Plan 2004’).

The ambition of raising the proportion of graduates in the vocational training population could only be achieved by increasing student mobility within the vocational training system, and especially from senior secondary vocational (mbo) to higher professional education (hbo). There was virtually no scope for a further increase in the numbers of
students going from pre-university (vwo) to university education, and the same applied for students moving from senior general secondary education (havo) to hbo. As well as raising the number of students moving from mbo to hbo, the educational outcomes (success rates) in higher education itself would also have to be raised substantially.

10.4 Educational reform: competence-based education

The Adult and Vocational Education Act had given the National Vocational Training Organisations (LoBS), which were later redubbed as expertise centres for vocational training and industry, the task of developing a qualification structure. This structure comprised no fewer than 700 qualifications, which drew heavily on the programmes from the former apprenticeship system. Senior secondary vocational education, however, incorporated not only day-release schemes (bbl) (comparable to the apprenticeship system), but also full-time vocational training (bol). As a result, there were calls for a broader notion of ‘qualification’: competences.

Confusion quickly took hold as to how the concept of ‘competence’ should be interpreted. It was for example interpreted very differently by those working in education (a constructivist approach with heavy emphasis on independent and active learning) than by the organised business community. This has led to serious differences of opinion over the last decade between the main policy actors: the Vocational Training and Adult Education Council (Bve-raad) (later the Netherlands Association of vet Colleges (MBO Raad)) as the representative of education establishments and the Association of National Centres of Expertise on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (Colo), which represented the interests of the business community (industries and sectors). These differences of opinion were not limited to differences of interpretation of the notion of competence, but were also manifest in the discussions about the preferred development of training programmes. For example, those working in education felt that Colo was seeking to impose an interpretation that was much too restrictive and occupation-specific; conversely, Colo accused the educational field of starting far too many fashionable courses, for which there is no call on the jobs market. The government has allowed this battle between the main policy actors in senior vocational education to rage on unfettered over the last ten years. It has neither exerted control nor given direction.

10.5 Bottlenecks and policy themes

Student complaints
In 2006 and 2007 there was a growing number of complaints from pupils and students about the quality of education. They expressed their dissatisfaction among other things through campaigns organised by the Young People’s Vocational Training Organisation (jOBS). In 2007 three national organisations of pupils and students sent a joint letter to the then State Secretary for Education with the revealing title ‘We want to learn: give us the chance’, in which they demanded more lessons and better teaching. The letter prompted a Parliamentary inquiry into the reforms which had taken place in secondary education in the 1990s. One of the aspects covered by the inquiry was the concept of
‘new learning’, in which the pupil or student is expected to construct their own knowledge and understanding in an independent, active way and in interaction with their environment (for example during an internship). The different forms of ‘new learning’ have in common a move away from predominantly classroom-based teaching methods; the pupil/student becomes the director of their own learning process and the teacher is more of a supporter and facilitator in that learning process than a disseminator of subject knowledge.

Competency-based education is not the same thing as ‘new learning’. The notion of competency comes from the business community and is aimed at improving the match between vocational training and labour market practice, not just in terms of subject knowledge and skills, but also social skills and qualities such as resistance to stress, initiative, flexibility and empathy. Many of these skills and qualities are difficult to train, let alone to acquire through an education course. Partly for this reason, more and more course time began to be spent in work practice. In practice, however, this led to a marked extensification of vocational education, with fewer and fewer lessons and teacher contact hours, in turn leading to a sharp decline in the attention for subject knowledge and skills.

In a response to the complaints, the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad) promised improvements: guaranteed teaching hours, a balanced mix of theory and practice and teaching supervised by qualified staff. Unrest arose again in 2010 about the quality of senior secondary vocational education. The complaints this time were mainly about the fact that students were expected to spend most of their time at school working independently, that a very large number of lessons were cancelled and that many teachers were unqualified.

An evaluation study of the standard number of teaching hours in senior secondary vocational education revealed wide variation between different institutions and courses. According to the study, the statutory requirement of 850 contact hours per study year (including the hours spent on internships) is enough to determine whether an institution is meeting its statutory requirements, but offers insufficient guarantees of learning time with good-quality supervision under the responsibility of a qualified teacher. According to the Action Plan for Senior Vocational Education 2011-2015 (Actieplan mbo 2011-2015) that was published in February 2011, a bigger slice of those standard 850 hours need to be spent on teaching. This intensification will have to be balanced by a reduction in the overall length of level-4 courses (middle management programmes) from four years to three years.

Lots of attention for at-risk young people in senior secondary vocational education

The introduction of the Adult and Vocational Education Act in 1996 meant the disappearance of non-qualifying programmes, such as part-time non-formal education for young people and orientation and bridging courses. The basic qualification standard (mbo level 2, basic vocational training), which was the starting point for reducing premature school dropout, quickly exposed a gap in the training system, however, in that a high percentage of students were found to have difficulty in making the transition from pre-vocational (vmbo) to senior vocational education (mbo). These problems were experienced
both by young people who had not obtained a vmbo qualification and by students who were having difficulty choosing a sector or occupation. The idea that all school-leavers from vmbo programmes could go on directly to qualifying vocational courses therefore had to be quickly abandoned. Assistant-level programmes (mbo level 1) were introduced for the former group, while for the second group Labour-market Qualifying Assistant-level Programmes (AKA) were created some time later.

In order to prevent students leaving the education system after completing vmbo programmes (i.e. without a basic qualification), experiments began in 2008 with programmes that could be delivered jointly by vmbo and mbo providers but which could be offered within the vmbo infrastructure, so that students did not have to move to a different school; these were known as VM 2 programmes. A variant of this approach are the vmbo specialist programmes in Technology and Care.

Many premature school-leavers are confronted with an accumulation of problems. In order to be able to offer extra care and support to these ‘overburdened’ young people, the government made available additional funding in 2009 for providing additional facilities in a number of large urban regional training centres.

The image of senior secondary vocational education (mbo) in recent years has been largely dictated by problems with a relatively small number of students in level-1 programmes (roughly 4% of the total number of students, including a relatively high proportion of boys with a non-Western or Antillean background). According to the Action Plan for Senior Vocational Education 2011-2015, level-1 students would in the future be given their own place within the mbo system, on ‘entry-level’ programmes.

Sharp increase in transfers from senior secondary to higher professional education

Over the last ten years, more and more students qualifying in level-4 mbo programmes (middle management training programmes) have gone on to higher professional education (hbo); today, more than half do so. In the first years of the last decade, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad) was aiming to maximise participation in the higher professional programmes these institutions provide, either with a view to achieving the espoused aim of raising the number of graduates or based on the emancipatory function that HBO has traditionally played for young people from lower social backgrounds. This objective was broadly embraced by individual universities of applied sciences. It offered them an extra argument for attracting as many students as possible, something that was also strongly encouraged by the government’s funding system. Since the introduction of the Adult and Vocational Education Act, however, qualified mbo students have been trained primarily for middle management positions on the labour market. Their subject knowledge is much less well-developed than in the period when vocational education still came under the Secondary Education Act, and their general education is also considerably less advanced. In response to this, universities of professional education did not try to raise the level of incoming mbo students, however, but instead lowered the standards of their courses. The low standard of a number of primary school teacher training colleges provided the first evidence of this trend.
In the first years of the 21st century, not only were many new cross-sector vmbo/mbo programmes introduced, but experiments were also conducted involving short (two-year) higher professional courses, known as Associate Degree (AD) programmes. The need for courses like these that fitted between mbo level 4 and hbo degree-level programmes was championed mainly by mkb-Nederland, which represents the Dutch SME sector. This need also slotted in seamlessly with the government’s desire to increase the number of young people in higher education (50% target). From the start, the position of the AD programmes was the subject of debate between the mbo and hbo sectors. Senior secondary vocational education (mbo) had traditionally offered a large number of post-initial ‘mbo-plus’ programmes; however, in the first half of the first decade of this century, universities of applied sciences also began developing all manner of new programmes (such as the ‘SME route’ and other forms of dual training). The first experiments with the two-year Associate Degree programmes in higher professional education began in 2006. Not only did these programmes have to be strongly focused on occupational practice, but also had to form part of an hbo bachelor’s degree programme, a dual function which in retrospect has proved difficult to achieve. Moreover, the low student numbers mean that AD programmes have become an expensive luxury for universities of applied sciences. In 2008, the government announced that regional training centres would be allowed to work together with universities of applied sciences to offer AD programmes within their own institutions, though with the university of applied sciences remaining responsible for issuing the degrees.

Quality, effectiveness and manageability

Government policy on senior secondary vocational education (mbo) has since 2008 been driven by concerns about the educational quality and efficacy and the manageability of regional training centres. Several committees have been set to work and studies commissioned. Many of the recommendations from these committees have since been included in the Action Plan which appeared in February 2011.

11. Government and education system: from system to responsibility for the context

This chapter first discusses the question of which factors play a role in the placing of the various system characteristics on the agenda, and which type of systemic problems these were. It then describes which (policy) actors exerted a key influence on the decision-making processes and how their position has changed over time.

11.1 Agenda-building and the influence of (policy) actors

Why did the various topics appear on the agenda?
A large number of factors play a role in the selection of topics that ultimately end up on the policy agenda: the economic and social context and political relationships, but also the seriousness and urgency of the problem, the media attention it receives and the public support for a different way of addressing it.
The placing of the theme ‘desired education’ on the agenda and the resultant proposal for orientation-free planning of education (chapter 7) can best be explained using the gulf model as described in chapter 6. Those who raised the problem feared that the discrepancy already present between the existing schools network (predominantly confessional) and what parents wanted (concerned mainly with the atmosphere and educational quality of the school) would only increase as a result of the substantial raising of the standards for founding new schools. The gulf model also explains the placing of the Going to School Together policy on the agenda (chapter 8). Although the rising participation in special education and the associated rise in costs had been on the agenda since the 1970s, earlier measures had had no effect whatsoever, and the rising participation and costs had become unmanageable. A new administrative approach was needed to put an end to this. The placing on the agenda of the policy ambition of substantially raising the education level of young people in order to benefit the competitiveness of the Netherlands (chapter 10) can also be explained using the gulf model.

The placing of Islamic schools (chapter 7) on the agenda is best explained by the barrier model. Although the magnitude of the problem was small in terms of the number of schools and pupils, the media attention was considerable. This led to an increase in the objections and concerns expressed about the potential negative effects of the founding of Islamic schools (weak integration, accumulation of disadvantage, danger of radicalisation).

The best model for explaining the placing of the personal budget on the agenda (chapter 8) is the impetus model. The problem whereby parents with a disabled child were often unable to make use of a mainstream school had been around for some time. The increased attention for inclusive education and the switch from a supply-driven to demand-driven approach in other areas offered a policy window for a different approach to the problem of the segregation between mainstream and special education. Moreover, a committee had already worked out a plan. The impetus model probably also offers the best explanation from the fact that the earlier selection moment on the transition from primary to secondary education (chapter 9), following a political stalemate of almost 15 years, ultimately led to detailed agreements in the Coalition Agreement (1989), laying the basis for the third government under Ruud Lubbers. In the negotiations on that Coalition Agreement, there was a trade-off between spending cuts and action to reduce incapacity benefits (as demanded by the Christian Democrats) on the one hand and basic education and health insurance (Labour demands on the other. There was moreover already a bill in place which only needed to be amended.

The placing on the agenda of issues relating to educational quality – learning standards (chapter 7), reference standards (chapter 9) – can be best explained by the relative attention model. For a long time, little attention was paid to educational quality (in terms of cognitive skills and standards); other developments and priorities took priority (controlling costs, ‘new learning’, reducing the shortage of teachers, raising the education level of the population). Attention for the quality of teaching is often a reaction to a period in which there has been a focus on the accessibility of education (quantity) or its efficiency (spending cuts).
What type of systemic problems led to the creation of policy?
In the vast majority of cases, matching problems and poor educational outcomes were
the reason for placing an issue on the agenda. Policy attention in the last 20 years has
focused mainly on the matching problems between the different education sectors: the
transition from primary to secondary education; the transition from pre-vocational sec-
ondary education (vmbo) to senior secondary vocational education (mbo) and from mbo
to higher professional education (hbo). Since the turn of the century, education policy
in the Netherlands has moreover increasingly being dominated by performance tar-
gets derived from eu objectives and standards drawn from international benchmarks.
Low success rates (in terms of the percentage of early school-leavers without a basic
qualification or in terms of arithmetic or language achievements compared with other
countries), have often been the immediate reason for placing new policy on the agenda.
The third type of systemic problem – a discrepancy between supply and demand – has
less often led to the initiation of new policy. To some extent this is understandable,
because discrepancies between supply and demand are less visible. Where there is no
publicly funded supply, it is after all difficult for a demand to manifest itself.

11.2 Which (policy) actors had a major influence on the policy-building process?

Ministers
In the period 1990–9098, the emphasis was on restructuring within the education sys-
tem (upscale the Going to School Together policy, the creation of regional training
centres). The initiative for these reforms often lay with education ministers (all of the
Labour persuasion). At the end of the 1990s, the emphasis shifted towards administrative
relations. The education ministers in this period (liberal vvd ministers in 1998–2002 and
Christian Democrats in 2002–2007 and 2007–2010) placed the emphasis in these periods
successively on introducing more market forces into education, regulating the adminis-
trative relations between government and education establishments (governance) and
educational quality.

Parliament
The Lower House of the Dutch Parliament has taken a clear lead on a number of occa-
sions in recent years. This was the case, for example, with the motion submitted in 1993
by the non-confessional parties which was to lead to the proposal for orientation-free
planning of education, with the issue (raised mainly by the liberal vvd party) in relation
to Islamic schools (2003) and with the Parliamentary decision, in the wake of growing
complaints about educational quality (2007), to instigate a Parliamentary inquiry into
the secondary education reforms in the 1990s.
The number of Parliamentary questions tabled on problems, incidents and abuses has
increased sharply in recent years. The questions are generally based on reports in the
media; these sometimes lead to hypes (in turn leading to new rules or more supervi-
sion), but can also mean that problems or abuses that have been ignored for a long time
finally appear on the political agenda.
The Education Council
Since 1997, the Education Council has been the only permanent educational advisory body in the Netherlands. In that year, both the composition and tasks of the Council changed. The Council is the authoritative body for issues relating to Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution. The influence of its advisory reports varies depending on the issue. It sometimes takes years before that influence becomes apparent (learning standards); sometimes the timing is such that the Council’s recommendations are embraced immediately (standards, merger test); while other recommendations encounter so much resistance from the education world that they do not even make it on to the policy agenda. The Education Council is one of the few bodies whose overarching perspective means it is able to some extent to counterbalance the sectoralisation of education policy.

The Inspectorate for Education
The position and role of the Dutch Inspectorate for Education has also changed radically over the last 20 years. Its supervisory activities have shifted increasingly in recent years to a focus on individual schools and colleges, with the intensity of the supervision gradually coming to be linked to a risk analysis based on available data (at school level). The supervisory function has shifted away from supervision performed for the education minister (generalising) to supervision on behalf of the citizen (quality of individual schools). The focus on (very) poorly performing individual schools has however reduced the attention devoted to developments in educational quality in general and also to important developments going beyond individual schools and sectors.

Policy themes in the education world
The organisations representing the different educational sectors (Association of Universities in the Netherlands (vSNU), Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO- raad), Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad), Dutch Council for Secondary Education (vo-raad) and the Dutch Council for Primary Education (po-raad)) were relatively new players in 2010, but have far and away the biggest influence on education policy. They operate as employers’ organisations in their sectors, represent the interests of (governing boards in) their sector and represent their sectors in consultations with the government. In addition, they sometimes take responsibility for policy formulation and implementation.

The influence of the national teaching unions has declined in recent decades. Negotiations on policy on terms of employment between the national government and central trade union federations has been replaced by negotiations between the sector organisations and the trade unions in each individual sector.

The influence of organisations of parents, pupils and students varies and is based largely on the ‘squeaky wheel system’. Complaints, campaigns and immediate attention are the main tools at the disposal of these organisations.

Influential policy actors outside education
Until the early 1990s, education was still a closed policy sector, a sort of ‘pedagogical province’. This situation has changed markedly. The first outsiders to gain an influence
over education policy were (the organisations of) employers. They have now become the most influential external party, through participation in educational consultations, the issuing of advisory reports (in collaboration with central employee organisations in the Social and Economic Council and the Labour Foundation), providing chairpersons for important advisory committees (the (Wagner, Rauwenhoff and Oudeman Committees), espousing standpoints, lobbying government ministers (including in ministries other than Education, such as Economic Affairs and Social Affairs and Employment) and Parliament and – in the area of implementation – developing and maintaining the qualification structure (senior secondary vocational education).

The influence of international organisations such as the OECD and EU has also grown enormously since the turn of the century, although that influence is entirely indirect. These organisations exert their influence mainly through international comparative research (OECD) and the formulation of common policy ambitions (EU). International comparisons, policy ambitions and linked national performance targets have perhaps been the most influential developments for education policy in the last ten years.

The influence of the world of science is also unmistakable, though is not always immediately identifiable. There has in any event been a shift in recent decades in the influence of scientific disciplines on education policy, away from law (until the 1950s) towards sociology (1960s and 70s), economics and public administration (from the 1980s onwards), psychology (first decade of the 21st century) and brain science (since 2010). Research attention for the education system and educational context was extremely limited for a long time, but has increased significantly in recent years thanks to the availability of international comparative data on education systems. Little attention is paid to government education policy. Evaluation research, which is generally mandatory under major Acts of Parliament, is generally concerned mainly with establishing whether the envisaged effects of the new policy have been achieved; the question of whether the government has done the right things and has done things right is generally left out of consideration.

11.3 Conclusions and qualifying comments in relation to the formation of policy on the four system characteristics

Sectoralisation of education policy
Following the restructuring of educational provision in the 1980s and 90s, the Dutch education system today comprises four sectors (primary education, secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education), which are governed by five pieces of legislation: the Primary Education Act, the Expertise Centres Act, the Secondary Education Act, the Adult and Vocational Education Act and the Higher Education and Research Act. The different education sectors vary in the way they are regulated and funded, and the Ministry of Education is still largely organised and divided along these sectoral lines (division of portfolios between ministers, departmental configuration). The policy arenas also differ from one sector to another. In consultations between government and the education field, the sector organisations are far and away the most important points of contact for the government.
Virtually no policy has been formulated over the last 20 years covering the entire education system and educational context. Government policy in these areas is effectively the sum of the policy pursued in relation to the individual sectors.

- The sectoralisation of education policy has put pressure on the cohesion within the educational context. This manifests itself mainly in the transitions between sectors.
- Sectoralisation leads to passing of the buck, for example in the transition from primary to secondary education, from pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo) to senior secondary vocational education (mbo) and from mbo to higher professional education (hbo).
- There are too few overarching forces. The Education Council is now the only body which produces sector-overarching studies and recommendations with any regularity. Scientific research on trends in the education sector is also largely organised along sectoral lines.

The position and role of the government in education has changed markedly over the last 20 years

Where until the 1980s the government was still by far the most important policy actor, often governing schools and colleges centrally through highly detailed legislation, in 2010 deregulation and increasing autonomy meant the government had become simply one among many policy actors, which is largely dependent for educational development and performance on the behaviour of decentralised actors: (organisations of) school and college governing boards, school heads and teachers. However, under the Dutch Constitution the government is still responsible for guaranteeing the quality, accessibility and efficacy of education.

The government has regularly had difficulty in recent decades with the increased autonomy of school and college boards. By introducing educational reforms in secondary education in the 1990s, the government intervened far too much in the pedagogical structuring of education, at least according to the Parliamentary committee of inquiry. That intervention was at odds with the principle of freedom of education as laid down in the Constitution. The transfer of administrative powers not only brought benefits for the government (a reduced policy burden, greater ability to control government spending), but also disadvantages. The increased administrative autonomy of schools and colleges regularly stood in the way of policy developments considered desirable by the government, for example as regards the relationship between mainstream and special education. The funding systems used led to strategic behaviour by school and college boards. That administrative autonomy was moreover not devolved to schools and colleges themselves, but to their governing boards. Administrative upscaling increased the distance between those boards and the teachers ‘at the coalface’. As a result, the professional development of teachers was impeded rather than enhanced.

Changes in the government’s role and priorities did little to foster consistency of policy. A period in which the government had given clear direction (legislation, restructuring of educational provision, educational reforms) was followed by several years in which the government concentrated mainly on offering scope to others (market forces, freedom to offer new educational programmes), after which the course changed yet again towards
making agreements on the results to be achieved (performance standards) and making schools and colleges accountable for their educational outcomes (external and internal supervision). These changes in government stance have been accompanied over the last 20 years by major shifts in the prioritisation of public interests: a shift from efficiency (upscale, cost control and efficient learning pathways) to accessibility (progression through the vocational training system, more higher education graduates) and subsequently to quality (reference standards, stricter examination standards, more excellence). Substantive ambitions and the administrative stance of the government have been revised at least three times during the last two decades.

– The government has devoted little attention in the last 20 years to the possible negative effects of increasing autonomy for schools and colleges. The drive towards deregulation and greater autonomy was inspired largely by a desire to reduce the policy burden for the government and enable it to control public spending better. More autonomy would lead to fewer rules and higher quality, so ran the dictum. The possibility that administrative autonomy could lead to abuse of powers and resources (in the form of calculating behaviour by schools and parents) and to a lowering of quality standards (as a result of a funding system that was based on student numbers and educational performance) was not properly considered.

– Shifts in the role and priorities of the government were related not just to changes in political coalitions, but also to the personal expertise, backgrounds and ambitions of successive education ministers. In addition, the invisible but influential hand of the Minister of Finance played an important role (setting financial frameworks, prescribed budgeting and accounting methods, educational review reports).

– The government sometimes went too far in seeking to guarantee the three public interests. It made too little allowance for the fact that those interests (accessibility, quality and efficiency) are sometimes at odds with each other and cannot be realised simultaneously (trilemma). The strong focus on efficiency (1990-1998) led to reduced accessibility of higher education. The subsequent strong emphasis on accessibility (1998-2007) in turn led to a fall in standards (qualification inflation). In response to this latter development, the emphasis since 2007 has been mainly on improving educational quality.

Radical change in the policy arena, with inevitable consequences
The policy arena in 2010 was very different from that in 1990. Major new players have entered that arena, such as the sector organisations representing governing boards and employers. The influence of these new players has moreover increased considerably over recent years.
Some educational organisations have seen their influence decline, while others have changed their mission. Although the teaching unions have pooled their strengths, their influence over national education policy has declined in reality. New players have also emerged on the teaching front in the last 20 years, such as the Better Education in the Netherlands Association (bōN). Other educational organisations have changed their mission.
The consultative structure between government and the education sector has also changed. The highly institutionalised consultation structure was changed during the first ‘purple’ (labour/liberal) government term. Separate consultation forums were created for each education sector, giving the government more freedom to make its own judgments between the interests of the different sectors, although those judgments were rarely explicitly mentioned. Since the ‘Fortuyn revolt’ in 2002, the consultation structure between government and the education world has become ever more diffuse. Discussions are now held not only with organisations representing the education sector, but also with experts and individuals who make pronouncements about education in the media. The consultations also more often take place on the basis of individual policy themes (e.g. appropriate education).

– The relationship between the government and education organisations has changed radically in a number of areas. The substantive educational expertise within the Ministry of Education has declined; senior officials are selected primarily on the basis of their process and management expertise. Many senior officials with a great deal of substantive expertise moved into the education field itself in the 1990s. The reverse step – from education to Ministry – was very common in the past, but no longer occurs. The Education Council is now the only permanent advisory body. The number of temporary committees – which are easier for the government to control – has increased strongly.

– Teachers have lost authority. Government policy on teachers has been driven in recent years mainly by the threatened shortage of teachers. The quality of teachers and teacher training programmes has been largely left to schools and higher education institutes themselves. The teacher training programmes provided by universities of applied sciences have been portrayed in a negative light for some time; not only do these programmes attract the weakest students from secondary school (senior general secondary education students without a qualification in mathematics), but also students qualifying from senior secondary vocational education who themselves often have difficulty with the subject matter taught in the final year of primary school. Of all higher professional (hbo) programmes offered by universities of applied sciences, the teacher training programmes are far and away the least challenging and selective. Moreover, unlike other occupational groups requiring a higher education level, teachers do not have their own professional association which concerns itself with the quality of the profession, the standards of intake into the teaching profession and the quality of teacher training programmes.

– The influence of actors from outside the field of education has increased greatly over the last 20 years. In reality, such external influences have often been more important in shaping the course of education policy than voices from the education sector itself. The main external influences come from employers and international organisations. The growing influence of these actors is a corollary to the increased dominance of the economic perspective in education (policy).
Scant attention for the responsibility of the government itself
Chapters 7 to 10 inclusive of this report paint a picture of policy-building processes which were often extremely sluggish (‘muddling through’), took many years to complete and often produced few results or even had adverse effects. The government has provided little by way of substantive direction in education policy over the last ten years, partly as a reaction to the piling up of new policy (upscaleing and educational reforms) in the 1990s (1990-1998), and partly as a result of liberal views on deregulation and market forces (1998-2002) and Christian Democratic views on subsidiarity and sovereignty and self-determination (2002-2010). The government preferred to take the route of leaving policy to the world of education itself, though did create more countervailing powers at the level of school and college governing boards (supervisory boards, student/parent participation). The government also assigned an important role and position to sector organisations representing boards in the policy-building and implementation process.

– The policy-building processes concerning the relationship between mainstream and special education and the position and function of senior secondary vocational education make clear that ‘bottom-up policy’ frequently did not work, because the interests of the parties concerned – school boards in the case of the Going to School Together policy, and the Netherlands Association of vET Colleges (mbo Raad) and the Association of National Centres of Expertise on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (Colo) in the case of senior secondary vocational education – were too divergent. Conflicts of interest stood in the way of progress, and the government failed to take the lead. The ‘bottom-up’ policy approach leads to a clear dilemma between legitimacy (stakeholder support) and effectiveness (achieving the envisaged goal).

– Policy-building has become the preserve of people with a higher education background. The political and administrative arenas in education are dominated by graduates (with at least a higher professional education (hbo) background) and professionals (in place of volunteers). Most of those who influence and make policy have little knowledge of or affinity with what goes on at the lower end of the educational ladder (pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo), lower tracks of senior secondary vocational education (mbo). As a result, problems in these sectors have sometimes been neglected for long periods, while erroneous negative perceptions have generally been inadequately corrected. Plans to turn the tide are mostly put forward by advocacy groups representing the interests of young people from lower social backgrounds.

– The position and responsibilities of the sector organisations have still not fully crystallised. These organisations not only play a key role in policy preparation, but also take on all manner of implementation tasks. However, their position is less strong than their policy influence might suggest. They do not always represent all governing boards within their educational sector, are often faced with conflicts of interest between individual boards (e.g. between large and small boards) and do not have the power to bind the governing boards within their sector to joint decisions. The main objectives which they have in common are to keep the government out of their affairs as far as possible (retention of autonomy) and to secure the biggest possible slice of the education budget (budget maximisation).
Insufficient attention is given to checks and balances at national level. The literature on governance mainly deals with checks and balances at the level of subsidised institutions, and the education sector itself adopts this same focus on the micro-level of governing boards. By contrast, there is little sign of a move to improve governance at the macro-level of the government itself (control mechanisms, balanced relationships between stakeholders and transparency).

Is evidence-based education policy really possible?
Since the publication of the report by the Parliamentary committee of inquiry which investigated the educational reforms (the Dijsselbloem Committee), policy on educational reforms must be proven to be effective. It is however questionable whether this requirement is realistic. Evidence-based policy assumes a degree of rationality and predictability, whereas the case studies show time and again just how complex and unpredictable policy-building processes are. Changes in the economic and social context or in the political relationships – the fall of the government, for example, leading to the abrupt breaking off of the policy-building process, after which new ministers immediately chart a new course – largely determine the outcome of policy-building processes. Another conclusion from the case studies is that the actors who have to implement the policy often behave differently from the way the government assumed (or considered desirable) in its policy documents. The policy-building processes in relation to the four system characteristics show that ‘law’ and ‘budget’ by no means always offer a guarantee of successful policy.

- Ex ante research on how realistic the assumptions of policymakers are as regards stakeholder behaviour could prevent unintended effects of policy.
- A little used policy instrument is dialogue and persuasion. A well-substantiated and persuasive account, followed by a meaningful dialogue, can work wonders, but this technique is rarely deployed. Yet this instrument fits in perfectly with a less controlling and more process-based education policy. It does however place high demands on the quality of ministers and senior civil servants (substantive expertise, authority and persuasiveness). It is questionable whether these qualities are sufficiently in evidence at present.