

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

**As a result of the Bologna process, the higher education system in the Netherlands is organised around a three-cycle degree system, consisting of bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees.**

**Two types of programmes are offered in higher education: research-oriented degree programmes offered primarily by research universities, and professional higher education programmes offered primarily by universities of applied sciences.**

## Primary and secondary education:

### access to higher education

Children are allowed to begin school at the age of four, but are not legally required to do so until the age of five. Primary education lasts eight years (of which seven are compulsory), in the last year of which pupils are advised as to the type of secondary education they should pursue.

Secondary education, which begins at the age of 12 and is compulsory until the age of 16, is offered in several types at several levels. *VMBO* programmes (four years) combine general and vocational education, after which pupils can continue in senior secondary vocational education and training (*MBO*) lasting one to four years. The two programmes of general education that grant admission to higher education are *HAVO* (five years) and *VWO* (six years). Pupils are enrolled according to their ability. The last two years of *HAVO* and the last three years of *VWO* are referred to as the *tweede fase* (literally, second phase), or upper secondary education. During these years, pupils focus on one of four subject clusters (*profielen*), each of which emphasizes a certain field of study in addition to satisfying general education requirements. Each cluster is designed to prepare pupils for programmes of study at the tertiary level. A pupil enrolled in *VWO* or *HAVO* can choose from the following subject clusters:

- 1) Science and Technology (*Natuur en Techniek*)
- 2) Science and Health (*Natuur en Gezondheid*)
- 3) Economics and Society (*Economie en Maatschappij*)
- 4) Culture and Society (*Cultuur en Maatschappij*)

Only the six year *VWO* diploma grants access to the bachelor programmes offered by research universities; the *HAVO* diploma and the highest level of *MBO* grant access to the bachelor programmes offered by universities of applied sciences.

## Higher education

Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institution: research universities and universities of applied sciences. Research universities include general universities, universities specializing in engineering and agriculture, and the Open University. Universities of applied sciences include general institutions as well as institutions specializing in a specific field such as agriculture, fine and performing arts, or teacher training. Whereas research universities are primarily responsible for offering research-oriented programmes, universities of applied sciences are primarily responsible for offering programmes of higher professional education, which prepare students for particular professions.

These tend to be more practically oriented than programmes offered by research universities.

In this binary and three-cycle system, bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees are awarded. Short-cycle higher education leading to the Associate degree is offered by universities of applied sciences. Degree programmes and periods of study are quantified in terms of the ECTS credit system.

The focus of degree programmes determines both the number of credits required to complete the programme and the degree which is awarded. A research-oriented bachelor's programme requires the completion of 180 credits (3 years) and graduates obtain the degree Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science (BA/BSc), depending on the discipline. A bachelor's degree awarded in the applied arts and sciences requires the completion of 240 credits (4 years), and graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Bachelor of Engineering, B Eng, or Bachelor of Nursing, B Nursing). An associate's degree in the applied arts and sciences requires the completion of 120 credits (2 years), and students who complete the 2-year programme can continue studying for a bachelor's degree in the applied arts and sciences.

A research-oriented master's programme requires the completion of 60, 90, or 120 credits (1, 1.5, or 2 years). In engineering, agriculture, and math and the natural sciences, 120 credits are always required. Graduates obtain the degree of Master of Arts or Master of Science (MA/MSc). A master's degree awarded in the applied arts and sciences requires the completion of 60 to 120 credits and graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Master of Architecture, M Arch).

The third cycle of higher education, leading to the PhD, is offered only by research universities. The major requirement is completion of a dissertation based on original research that is publicly defended. All research universities award the PhD. In addition to the doctorate, the three engineering universities offer (technological) designer programmes consisting of advanced study and a personal design assignment in a number of engineering fields. The technological designer programme requires two years of study to complete and graduates obtain the degree "Professional Doctorate in Engineering (PDEng)". The training of medical specialists is the responsibility of the professional group in an organisational setting at a university hospital.

## Requirements for Access to Higher Education

For access to research-oriented bachelor's programmes, students are required to have a *VWO* diploma or to have completed the first year (60 credits) of a bachelor's programme at a university of applied sciences. The minimum access requirement to universities of applied sciences is either a *HAVO* diploma or a diploma of secondary vocational education (*MBO* diploma), provided certain conditions are met. The *VWO* diploma also grants access to universities of applied sciences. For access to both types of higher education, pupils are required to have completed at least one of the subject clusters that fulfils the requirements for the higher education programme in question. A *quota*, or *numerus fixus*, applies for access to certain programmes, primarily in the medical sciences, and places are allocated mainly using a weighted lottery. Potential students older than 21 years of age who do not possess one of the qualifications mentioned above can qualify for access to higher education on the basis of an entrance examination and assessment (recognition of prior learning). For access to certain programmes, particularly those in the fine arts, students have to demonstrate the required artistic abilities. The only access requirement for the Open University is that applicants be at least 18 years of age.

For access to all master's programmes, a bachelor's degree in one or more specified disciplines is required, in some cases in combination with other requirements. Graduates with a bachelor's degree in the applied arts and sciences may have to complete additional requirements for access to a research-oriented master's degree programme.

## Credit System and Grading

A student's workload is measured in ECTS credits. According to Dutch law, one credit represents 28 hours of work and 60 credits represents one year of full-time study. The grading system used in the Netherlands is on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (outstanding). The lowest passing grade is 6; 9s are seldom given and 10s are extremely rare and grades 1-3 are hardly ever used. The academic year is 42 weeks long.

## Quality Assurance and Accreditation

A guaranteed standard of higher education, and alignment with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, is maintained through a national system of legal regulation and quality assurance, in the form of accreditation. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for legislation pertaining to education and the agriculture and public health ministries play an important role in monitoring the content of study programmes in their respective fields.

Quality assurance is carried out through a system of accreditation, administered by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (*NVAO*). According to the Dutch Higher Education Act, all degree programmes offered by research universities and universities of applied sciences must be evaluated according to established criteria. Programmes that meet those criteria are accredited: i.e. recognized for a period of six years. Only accredited programmes are eligible for government funding; students receive financial aid and graduate with a recognized degree only when enrolled in, and after having completed, an accredited degree programme. All accredited programmes are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes (*CROHO*).

Besides the accreditation of degree programmes, the Netherlands has a system by which the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recognizes higher education institutions by conferring on them the status of either "funded" or "approved". "Funded" indicates that the institution is fully financed by the government. "Approved" indicates that the institution does not receive funds from the government and has to rely on its own sources of funding. Whether a degree programme is offered by a 'funded' or an 'approved' institution, it must be accredited and registered in *CROHO* to be considered recognized.

N.B. If a bachelor or master degree programme is not registered in the *CROHO*, the quality is not assured by the Dutch quality assurance system. The quality may however be assured by another system.

## National Qualifications Framework

An important outcome of the Bologna process is the development of a "Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area". This overarching framework provides a general and common structure for qualifications awarded in countries signatory to the Bologna Declaration, and offers recommendations and guidelines for the development of mutually understandable qualifications frameworks at national levels. By the year 2010, all countries in the European Higher Education Area should have a national qualifications framework in place that complies with the goals and criteria of the European framework while describing the specific elements of each individual system.

The Netherlands is one of the first countries in the European Higher Education Area to complete the national qualifications framework, which has subsequently been evaluated by the Verification Committee and found to be compatible with the overarching European Qualifications Framework. The National Qualifications Framework of the Netherlands describes in detail the various levels and learning outcomes associated with higher education qualifications, in terms that are internationally compatible.

The responsibility for overseeing the framework and updating it when necessary has been allocated to the NVAO. Further information on the framework can be obtained on the NVAO website: [www.nvao.net/nqf-nl](http://www.nvao.net/nqf-nl).

© Nuffic, July 2009

Nuffic is the Netherlands organization for international cooperation in higher education. Our motto is Linking Knowledge Worldwide. This means linking people, because it's knowledge that makes us unique as people. Nuffic works in line with Dutch government policy to serve students and higher education institutions in three key areas:

• **Capacity Building & Scholarships**

Administering international mobility programmes (scholarships) and institutional cooperation programmes.

• **Communication**

Providing information about higher education systems in the Netherlands and in other countries; providing credential evaluation services; providing information in the Netherlands about studying abroad, and in other countries about studying in Holland; promoting Dutch higher education in other countries; encouraging international mobility.

• **Knowledge & Innovation**

Conducting studies into international cooperation in higher education; providing information to expert groups and consultation forums; transferring our knowledge of international cooperation in higher education through courses and seminars.

Nuffic  
Kortenaerkade 11  
P.O. Box 29777  
2502 LT The Hague  
The Netherlands  
t +31 (0)70 42 60 260  
f +31 (0)70 42 60 399  
[www.nuffic.nl](http://www.nuffic.nl)

*The information contained in this publication has been compiled with the greatest of care. Nevertheless, we are unable to guarantee its accuracy or completeness at the time of reading. The information may have been changed or updated. Nuffic cannot accept any liability for these changes. We recommend that you verify the accuracy of the information yourself where appropriate.*

*All intellectual property rights for this publication belong to Nuffic. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in an automated retrieval system or published in any form, without the prior written permission of the author.*