



Permanent education: lifelong learning and marginalised groups

Lifelong learning as a policy concept

In the Netherlands the concept of lifelong learning has been warmly embraced by policymakers during the last decade. The Dutch Council for Education (Onderwijsraad) is an independent governmental advisory body which advises the Minister, Parliament and local authorities. The Council provides advice, both solicited and unsolicited, to the Minister of Education, Sciences and Cultural Affairs and the Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management and Food Quality.

In 2003 the Council published a report "Make lifelong learning work". This report caused a lot of debate within Dutch policy and educational circles. It coincided with the advent of the second centre-right coalition government led by Christian-democrat Jan Peter Balkenende. This government had an ambitious agenda aimed at making the Netherlands a economic hub of innovation and education driven economic development. "Nederland Kennisland (i.e. "The Netherlands, country of knowledge") was an important slogan in those years. In 2005 the Council for Education published a follow up report in which it advocates setting in motion policy mechanisms to reach the goal that half of the Dutch population has received some form of high education. The report is called "Higher education for half of the Dutch population".

Present situation: not dramatic but needs to be improved

The situation nowadays in the Netherlands is not dramatic if one looks at the general level of education of the Dutch population but leaves a lot of room for improvement. Roughly 24 percent of the population has enjoyed education at the highest level, meaning university, college or higher professional education. In the words of the Council for Education "this number "has to be increased dramatically".

Stages of education

In education one has to differentiate between *pre initial education*, aimed at young children at a very young age, before they enter the educational system, the *initial education* at school and college or university and *post initial education*, aimed at people of all ages who already have left the educational system with or without some form of qualification.

In this framework we will focus on the post initial education: lifelong learning with special attention for groups who have difficult access to the labour market such as migrants.

General trends

It is a well known fact, reported yearly in the extensive surveys of the Dutch Social and Cultural Planbureau (SCP) and in the research of scholars like Paul Jungbluth that there is a considerable gap in Dutch education between "ethnic" pupils and "white" pupils. The general trend is that ethnic children do not go on to study in higher education in the same percentages as white children. This translates itself into a general trend which is also annually reported in the surveys of the SCP: Dutch citizens of ethnic background, even when they enjoy the same educational background as similar groups of white Dutch still are at a disadvantage when it comes to access to the labour market. Let alone that their chances diminish dramatically when they have lower or no formal educational qualifications. Drop-out rates among students from ethnic backgrounds are currently very high and run in the tens of thousands annually. Thus a social time bomb is in the making in the larger cities of the Netherlands where large pools of young men without educational qualification and no or very difficult access to the labour market are condemned to lead their lives permanently on the margins of society.