

Study Visit to the Netherlands

1st - 4th April 2001

Programme

1. The itinerary included visits to two schools - Meridiaan College, Amersfoort, and CSG Aquamarijn, Rotterdam - at five separate locations and meetings with representatives of the Dutch Inspectorate, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, the Association of Secondary Schools and individual teachers/principals.

Findings

2. The Dutch secondary education system is relatively complex. At face value there is a wide diversity of secondary school types in the Netherlands. Under the Dutch Constitution, their education system allows schools to be established in accordance with religious or ideological views and there are separate public and private schools, all of which are funded on the same basis. Private schools include Roman Catholic, Protestant and general schools: 70% of the pupil population attend private schools. A new school can be established by at least two hundred citizens submitting a request, whereupon the government must find the necessary finance.

3. Full-time secondary education starts at age twelve and is compulsory to age sixteen, and beyond that pupils who have demonstrated appropriate aptitude can continue to age seventeen (senior general secondary education - HAVO) or age eighteen (pre-university education - VWO). Most pupils in pre-vocational (VBO) and junior general secondary education (MAVO) pathways transfer to senior secondary vocational schools (MBO) at age sixteen, but in any

event must undertake part-time education until age eighteen - two days at age seventeen, one day at age eighteen.

4. Transfer between primary and secondary school education is largely determined by two separate assessments/tests of ability/aptitude the outcomes of which are made available to parents and the secondary school. The great majority of secondary schools rely on an assessment by the primary school of pupils' present ability/potential for particular types of education, ie, vocational, general or academic, together with an externally-marked examination covering four subjects (language, mathematics, information management and history/civics). This information is used by the secondary school for the initial assessment of pupils' potential for particular curriculum pathways and is used for streaming purposes in the first two years of basic education.

5. Pupils are taught in mixed ability classes in Year 1, and in schools with the full range of education types (MAVO, HAVO and VWO) pupils would be streamed in Year 2 into either the MAVO pathway or mixed HAVO/VWO groupings. In the latter case further streaming would take place at Year 3 for the final two years of senior general secondary education (HAVO) or the final three years for VWO.

Policy Review

6. The Dutch secondary education system has been undergoing radical reorganisation and change over the past ten years. This followed a strategic review of the system by the Government which decided that secondary education should begin with a three-year period of broad based general education for all with no real distinction between general (academic) and technical/vocational subjects, and with the objective of delaying the final choice of curriculum pathways until about age fourteen. At the same time the objective was to raise the status of vocational education through the integration/linkage of the separate pre-vocational schools (VBO) and junior general secondary schools (MAVO), and to encourage the amalgamation of schools which would offer the three main types of education (vocational, general and academic) in a single institution.

7. It appears that this policy has had limited success. The amalgamation of schools has produced many very large schools spread over a number of sites - the two schools visited each had some three thousand pupils - but in practice the individual component sites operate as separate autonomous units with minimal co-operation or linkages. The main value of the merging of the schools appears to be the opportunity for pupils to move between different sites to complete the later stages of their chosen curriculum pathway. There is now a general acceptance by Government and the Inspectorate that secondary schools are too large.

8. There is little evidence that the status and effectiveness of vocational education (VBO/MAVO) has improved. There appears to be some confusion about the nature of the curriculum, with a mixture of general, theoretical and work-related courses on offer. In relation to vocational pathways teachers and others had low expectations of pupils' abilities. In the schools visited the facilities for vocational/practical courses in VBO were limited and outdated.

Curriculum Choices

9. The curriculum for the first two to three years of 'basic education' is extensive, with fourteen to fifteen compulsory subjects - Dutch, English, French (or German), mathematics, biology, physics/chemistry, ICT, history, geography, economics, technology, social/life skills, physical education and music/arts/drama. There are different levels of course content depending on the assessed ability level of pupils, eg, in VBO/MAVO pupils would work to lower attainment levels than pupils in the higher academic streams (HAVO/VWO).

10. It is possible for pupils to move between the different types of education, for example, from the junior general secondary education stream to senior secondary education at age sixteen, provided the necessary level of attainment has been reached. In practice, there appears to be relatively little movement. In addition, once curriculum choices have been made at age fourteen or fifteen by pupils in both the senior general secondary and pre-university streams, they have little or no opportunity for change in the courses chosen.

Distinctive Features

11. The Dutch education system has a number of quite distinctive operational and administrative features. Schools have a high degree of autonomy in the application of the curriculum and the systems used for enrolling pupils: each secondary school can determine its own admissions process but must employ the two tests/assessments mentioned at paragraph 4 above.

12. Under open enrolment, schools must accept all applications for enrolment. There is an exception for the private school sector where applications can be rejected on, for example, religious or ideological grounds, but it is rare that schools would refuse applications. The school has the final say in determining the type of education appropriate to each pupil. Although there is a denominational system of education, there didn't appear to be anything distinguishing one school from another, except that RE was a subject in denominational schools.

13. Parents are responsible for school transport costs, ie, there is no free transport provision, except for pupils with statements of special needs, who attend special schools. There is no school meals service: most schools have serveries for soft drinks, etc, and pupils bring packed lunches.

14. There are no statutory requirements for schools to undertake standardised assessments or testing of pupils' performance/attainment levels during each type of education. Schools can determine their own system of assessment and reporting of pupils' progress. An examination is compulsory at the end of each type of education - at age sixteen for VBO/MAVO students, age seventeen for HAVO, and age eighteen for VWO (pre-university).

15. There are some two hundred and sixty attainment targets set by the Government across the secondary curriculum. In practice schools have not operated the compulsory test regime for these targets and they have now been given discretion to be selective about the use of annual tests.

16. Since 1999, there has been a new approach to teaching/learning in the senior general (HAVO) and pre-university (VWO) streams. Called 'Study Houses', this approach places the onus on students in their final two to three

years to develop and gather knowledge within their chosen course profile on the same lines as the student/tutor relationship in higher education.

17. School uniform is not worn at any schools - we were advised that this would be "unthinkable" in the Dutch culture.

Similarities with the Northern Ireland System

18. The Dutch schools system also has some features similar to the system in Northern Ireland. Under open enrolment parents continue to have a strong preference for the "higher" academic pathways (HAVO) although there is probably a better understanding and acceptance of the primary schools' assessment of ability/potential.

19. The system is "failing" children with lower academic ability; the arrangements for vocational education pre-age sixteen are unsatisfactory (high drop-out rate (40%) at senior vocational level).

20. Some 60% of the secondary school population is in the combined pre-vocational and junior general secondary school system (age twelve to sixteen).

21. Coaching for the primary school "transfer examination" (CITO) is becoming a feature of the system. This test is taken by 83% of the primary schools and is regarded by parents/schools as an important measure of ability and potential for secondary education.

22. Secondary schools are in competition for pupil numbers to increase their financial resources and status (larger schools can offer wider curriculum choices).

23. Since 1999, self-evaluation of school performance is a statutory requirement; this involves the preparation of a Development Plan and the publication of examination statistics in the annual school Prospectus. (Unofficial ranking lists of schools' performance have been produced by local newspapers).

24. The running costs of schools are funded by central Government; the funding formula is complex and includes elements for pupil numbers, the

condition/size of buildings, the nature of the curriculum offered and the social background and special educational needs of pupils. School building is funded by local councils.

Meetings with Inspectorate and other Educationalists

25. Briefing meetings were held with the Schools Inspectorate and representatives of the Ministry of Education and the Association of Heads of Secondary Schools (who are conducting a review of the systems of Quality Assurance of the Schools' System). These provided some helpful insights about the development of the Dutch post-primary education system.

26. There was a consensus that the curriculum and organisational changes introduced in the early 1990s had not been wholly effective - there are too many subjects in the compulsory core curriculum, too many Attainment Targets, the system has been generally overloaded, particularly at the pre-vocational level and a more differentiated approach to teaching is required. The changes which have been made to the basic education curriculum, the integration of the VBO and MAVO systems (to combine vocational and general education in the same curriculum pathway) are in their early stages and schools have been given considerable autonomy and discretion to be creative and to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils. The view was expressed that the continuum between the basic level of education and the upper secondary level is a little fragmented and potentially divisive (in terms of equality of opportunity).

27. The Association of Head Teachers of Secondary Schools has concerns also that there is inequality in the system, that choice of school type is often determined by geography and that delayed selection of curriculum pathways after basic education does not work well in practice for many young people. Concern was expressed also that there are signs of a two-tier selective system beginning to develop at the interface between basic education and the next level.

General Conclusions

28. The Dutch secondary education system has been going through a difficult change process which is designed to improve the status and effectiveness of vocational education and to enable all pupils to delay their choice of curriculum pathway until age fourteen, based on their performance during the early stages of basic education.

29. It is difficult to judge the extent of progress in a system which has, until recently, afforded schools a considerable degree of autonomy in the use of assessment/tests to measure year on year levels of attainment; and where schools are very large and dispersed over several sites.