Towards More Transparency in Higher Education

The Dutch National Qualifications Framework
## Summary of Dutch National Qualifications Framework higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Admission from</th>
<th>First cycle</th>
<th>Second cycle</th>
<th>Third cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>level 5</td>
<td>level 6</td>
<td>level 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mbo/havo/vwo</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree 240 ECTS</td>
<td>Master’s degree 60-120 ECTS</td>
<td>Doctorate (standard: 4 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academically oriented (Former title of ing.)</td>
<td>240 ECTS[3]</td>
<td>Medical specialist (standard: 3-6 years)[4]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VWO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Transparency in European higher education

Higher education of an outstanding quality constitutes the basis of our knowledge society. The international mobility of students and teachers is an essential component in this. People want to study and work wherever they can develop and use their talents to the optimum, without being hindered by national borders. That is why over the past ten years, the education ministers of – currently – 46 European countries have made numerous agreements on the development of a system of internationally comparable qualifications to make higher education systems more transparent and to bring them into better harmony with one another.

With the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the education ministers laid the foundations for the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. Every country observes a comparable structure of qualifications, uses the same credits system (ECTS) and awards graduates a Diploma Supplement in accordance with a European model.

### The role of qualifications frameworks

For the mutual recognition of qualifications, modular certificates and credits, proper comparability of the higher education systems of the different countries is essential. Each country participating in the Bologna process is therefore developing a national qualifications framework that is aligned with the overarching European framework, the European Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. The starting point is that the level of the programmes meets the generic competencies requirements as agreed for bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees and PhDs (the three cycles of higher education). These generic competencies are set down in the Dublin descriptors. When programmes are accredited, an investigation is conducted into whether or not the required level is being met.

### The Dutch Qualifications Framework

The Netherlands has also developed a national qualifications framework. This Dutch Qualifications Framework (NQF) describes the structure of the higher education system in our country. It indicates what prior education is required of students entering higher education, what types of higher education there are, how long the programmes at the various levels take to complete and how students can transfer to higher levels.


[2] Including Master’s programmes for first level teachers, humanistic arts, veterinary science, pharmacology, clinical technology and dentistry with effect from 2010.

[3] Including Master’s programmes for professionally oriented degrees in architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture (formerly postgraduate programmes).

[4] On completion of a Master of Medicine degree, candidates can continue to become Medical Specialists. These programmes vary in length from 3 to 6 years. The scope of these programmes for specialists is not indicated in ECTS credits.
Admission to higher education

Students enrolling in bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation – or to associate degree programmes – must have successfully completed MBO (secondary vocational education), HAVO (senior general secondary education) or VWO (pre-university education). Admission to bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation requires a VWO diploma. Furthermore, in several disciplines applicants are required to have passed a specific combination of final examination subjects.

The Open University offers academically oriented higher education at the level of the first, second and third cycles. No specific diplomas in prior education are required.

A diploma from each programme (associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree and PhD) offers direct access to the labour market (labour market qualification).

Transfers within higher education

Within higher education, students can transfer to a different level as well as to a different type of programme: after the propaedeutic year of a bachelor's programme with a professional orientation (HBO) to a bachelor's programme with an academic orientation (WO) or from a WO programme to an HBO programme. Students with an associate degree can transfer to the remaining section of a related bachelor's programme with a professional orientation. And, in principle, bachelor's degrees allow access to master's programmes, while master's degrees subsequently allow access to a PhD programme.

There are specific transfer possibilities for a few programmes. A Master of Science (MSc) degree allows admission to design programmes. Graduates of a master's programme in medicine can be registered on the medical register of professionals in order to become a medical practitioner. To become medical specialists, graduates have to complete a further professional programme.
What will change after the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework

For those who are familiar with the higher education system, the Dutch Qualifications Framework does not seem to entail new information. Yet it has some significant ramifications for higher education. The main features are outlined below.

**Learning outcomes**

One of the essential changes ensuing from the Bologna process is the use of learning outcomes to describe study programmes and their components. With a view to the national and international mobility of students and graduates, it is important to have a clear picture of the knowledge and skills mastered by someone holding a particular diploma. The description of study programmes based on the Dublin descriptors allows for an objective comparison.

**Quality assurance**

A good system of quality assurance ensures that graduates have acquired the knowledge, skills and attitude that are set down as the learning outcomes of the programme concerned. In the Netherlands, the accreditation of higher education programmes is performed by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). All accredited programmes, quality assessment reports, accreditation decisions and the accreditation/assessment frameworks are available on the NVAO website (www.nvao.net).

**European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)**

Institutions are required to indicate the amount of time students spend on each programme and programme component. The study load is expressed in ECTS credits. A full year of study (1680 hours) accounts for 60 ECTS credits. The general scope of each type of higher education programme in the Netherlands, as well as any exceptions, are laid down in the Dutch Higher Education Act, article 7.4. In addition to a credit system, the ECTS also provides guidelines for obtaining information about study programmes and the organisation of credit transfers when transferring from one institution to another (see the "User’s Guide 2009", http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf). Implementation of all elements of the ECTS within the higher education institutions is considered important to bolster student mobility.

**Diploma Supplement**

The Diploma Supplement, in accordance with the model agreed at the European level, describes the exit level and the learning outcomes of a study programme. It also specifies the higher level to which the diploma grants access. It is formulated in Dutch and English and is issued automatically by the educational institution to all its graduates, free of charge.

The Diploma Supplement is not only of paramount importance in order to be admitted to a subsequent study programme at another educational institution, but also when applying for jobs.
For more information:

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January 2010

A publication of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)
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Editing, layout and production: Storyline, Maarssen