

## **Review of Dutch degrees**

### **Introduction**

In 2002, legislation for the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Dutch higher education was passed by the Dutch Parliament. As of September 2002, the majority of Dutch students is studying in a Bachelor-Master structure.

In designating degrees, for reasons of national transparency a distinction was made between the profile types "research-oriented" and "professionally-oriented". Graduates from research-oriented education obtain Bachelor's and Master's degrees with "of Arts" or "of Science" added, depending on the discipline. Graduates from higher professional education obtain Bachelor's and Master's degrees indicating the field of study (for example, Bachelor of Engineering, Bachelor of Nursing, Master of Architecture).

Since the introduction of the Bachelor's-Master's degrees, the international transparency (or readability) of the titles has been under discussion (see the paragraph on degrees and titles below). Dutch research universities stress the importance of a distinction in profile types (research-oriented and professional), and the reflection of this in the titles used, for reasons of transparency for students as well as for the labour market. However the present distinction causes problems with international transparency in some fields of study. They also emphasize the need for international agreements about the use of titles. Dutch universities of professional education state that they are experiencing problems as a consequence of the new titles. They observe a negative effect of the new titles on international co-operation and on the recruitment of students from all countries oriented toward Anglo-Saxon degrees (for example, large parts of Asia and Africa, parts of Latin-America and many OECD countries). They state that

in an international environment, English language degrees without “of Arts” or “of Science”<sup>1</sup> added have less value in international comparisons and that graduates of bachelor degrees experience inaccessibility for international jobs in profit and non-profit organizations. Solutions in the short term are Diploma Supplements and the possibility to make exceptions in titles for research-oriented programmes. For the long term, the government has decided to appoint a Committee to look into the matter. The international representation will allow the committee to consider the issue from a multinational perspective.

### **Committee assignment**

The Committee has been established to undertake a review of the Dutch degrees in an international perspective. The review should describe designations of degrees (or rather: specifications of/additions to the Bachelor and Master titles) which are

- Internationally customary;
- Transparent with respect to profile types of education to the (inter)national labour market, to higher education institutions and to students;
- Solid; that is not under discussion or otherwise expected to be subject to change. (Note: this means that the names of degrees must be robust, not “subject to fashion” but deeply anchored, not in motion and not some fancy title or other that has just been conceived).

### *Starting points*

The Committee takes the following policy line regarding degrees for the Dutch system as starting points for their study.

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<sup>1</sup> In the old situation, graduates could also use the Bachelor’s and Master’s titles instead of the Dutch ones. The specifications of the Bachelor’s and Master’s titles were not regulated.

- The Netherlands has a binary system, which means there are two types of programmes: research-oriented education (wetenschappelijk onderwijs, *WO*), traditionally offered by research universities and higher professional education (hoger beroepsonderwijs, *HBO*), traditionally offered by hogescholen, or universities of professional education. In the following, the Dutch abbreviations *WO* and *HBO* will be used. The universities of professional education represent about 65% of all students in higher education. Parliament has only recently, with regard to this committee, adopted a motion that the binary distinction should be reflected in the degrees.
- The Netherlands has chosen degrees in the English language, so as to create a truly internationally comparable and recognizable system. The Bachelor's and Master's degrees are not translations of national titles. Although the Netherlands has adopted the Anglo-Saxon tradition of titles and the two-cycle structure, we are not adopting other elements often associated with an Anglo-Saxon education system. For example, we are maintaining a binary system and we are not introducing the selection of students or a specific Anglo-Saxon organization of programmes. However, individual institutions see the necessity to broaden the scope of their programmes and introduce elements inspired by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, like the major-minor model. Occasionally, a liberal arts college has been set up, but most *WO* programmes in the Netherlands are still discipline oriented.

### *Scope*

The scope of the degrees under study will be all of the accredited higher education degrees (see the section on the Dutch situation).

### *International comparative analysis*

The committee will make an international comparative analysis of the situation, developments and experiences regarding the designation of degrees. Thereby the committee will look at the designation of degrees and the content associated with these degrees. If possible, the committee could draw from the work done on the development of a European qualification framework (Bologna process) that seeks to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. The committee will also look into effects that titles in other countries have on local as well as international acceptance of degrees on the labour market, on international co-operation and on the recruitment of students. The committee will take into account the context in which degrees (and their designations) are awarded. For example, a degree can be awarded by an institution in its own right (situation in the United Kingdom) or determined by some sort of regulation or guideline issued by the ministry or determined by law (situation in the Netherlands).

### *Consultation*

The committee will hold discussions with a wide range of individuals, including industry and employer groups.

### *Report*

The committee is targeted to complete its deliberations in the first half of 2005 and will submit its study to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science by May 2005. The results of the committee's study, together with other evidence like the results of the Bologna process<sup>2</sup>, will help the government to make decisions on the titles for the long term.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1999, European education ministers signed the Bologna declaration. This declaration identifies a number of targets to be achieved. Important aims are the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, and the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees in order to promote European citizen's employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.

## The Dutch situation

### *Outline of the system*

In 2002, the Dutch parliament approved legislation for the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Dutch higher education. At research universities the programmes were converted from a single integrated cycle into two cycles, while at the universities of professional education the programmes were automatically converted into bachelor's programmes. Since September 2002, the higher education system has been organized around a three-cycle degree system, consisting of Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees. Some degree programmes, like dentistry and medicine, will continue to be offered as integrated programmes for some time.

The annex "The Education System in the Netherlands" offers a description of the Dutch system. The following paragraphs focus on the binary system and degrees and titles, as they are of particular importance to the review of the committee.

### *The binary system*

Bachelor's programmes and Master's programmes have either a professional orientation or a research orientation. This distinction, called the binary system, meets the demands of the labour market in the Netherlands and fits in with the previous education of students. The aim of WO Bachelor's programmes is primarily a preparation for a Master's programme. The primary aim of HBO Bachelor's programmes is to offer a first degree to enter the labour market. Most HBO Master's programmes, with the exceptions of teacher training, architecture, fine and performing arts and health, therefore have a post-experience character.

There are various ways in which the binary system is made visible to the labour market and to students: accreditation of degree programmes, Diploma Supplements, designation of degrees and names of institutions.

- Accreditation. All degree programmes, in order to be allowed to award degrees on the basis of Dutch law, have to be evaluated according to established criteria. Programmes that meet those criteria will be accredited. The accreditation criteria differ for WO and HBO programmes. The accreditation of the programme determines whether it is higher professional education or research-oriented education.
- Diploma Supplements. A Diploma Supplement is obligatory and should be used to explain the orientation of the programme.
- Designation of degrees. According to the law (accredited) research-oriented degrees<sup>3</sup> have the specification “of Arts/of Science” added.
- Names of institutions. “Hogescholen” offer higher professional education and “universiteiten” offer research-oriented education, according to their respective missions. However, it is not forbidden for a “hogeschool” to submit a programme for accreditation as a *WO*-Bachelor or *WO*-Master, nor is it forbidden for a “universiteit” to submit a programme for accreditation as a *HBO*-Bachelor or a *HBO*-Master. Up to now, one programme of a “hogeschool” has been accredited as *WO*-master . A related issue is the translation of “hogescholen” and “universiteiten” into English. These translations are not regulated. It is customary to use the designation University of Professional Education for “hogescholen”. However, some “hogescholen” seem to present themselves internationally with the name University.

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<sup>3</sup> Post-experience degrees excluded

## *Degrees and titles*

The present situation is that institutions have the right, by law, to award Bachelor's and Master's degrees for programmes accredited by the Netherlands-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO). The NVAO was established by international treaty and guarantees the quality of higher education.

According to the law, (accredited) WO degrees<sup>4</sup> have the specification “of Arts/of Science” added. However, this decision is controversial. This is illustrated by the succession of events regarding titles:

- Policy document “Towards an open higher education”: distinction in titles. Following the recommendations of the Committee-Rinnooy Kan it was proposed to reserve the specifications “of Arts/of Science” for WO programmes.
- Draft legislation: no distinction in titles. Higher education institutions are free to determine the specifications to be added to the Bachelor's and Master's titles in order to choose titles that would be internationally transparent in that particular discipline or profession.
- Amendment of parliament: a distinction in titles is introduced so as to express the binary system in the designation of degrees. Parliament recently confirmed this wish in a motion.
- Motion of parliament: government is requested to make international agreements on titles.
- Proposed amendment of the law: exceptions to the rules are allowed. For reasons of international transparency, the minister might decide that certain WO degrees have specifications other than “of Arts/of Science”, such as the internationally well-known Bachelor or Master of Law or Master of Philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> Post-experience degrees excluded

- Proposed amendment of the law: Students who started studying Higher Professional Education (HBO) prior to 2002 can use titles in accordance with the situation before that time. Therefore, they can use titles with the addition “of Arts/of Science”, as the specifications of the Bachelor’s titles were not regulated (see footnote).
- Proposed amendment of the law: a possibility is opened to set new ministerial rules regarding the specifications of Bachelor’s and Master’s titles, thereby replacing the rule of “of Arts” and “of Science”.
- Motion of parliament with regard to this committee: the binary distinction should be reflected in the degrees.

Graduates are free to choose either the international degree or the traditional Dutch title. The traditional Dutch titles, including the legal protection, remain in force.

The designation of degrees is regulated only for accredited programmes. Non-accredited programmes award degrees in their own right or on the basis of foreign law. For programmes that are funded by the government, accreditation is obligatory. Some programmes that are not funded by government, like post-experience Masters, prefer not to be accredited because they want to be free to add “of Arts/of Science” to their degree. Universities of professional education rather opt for “accreditation” by foreign organizations, for example universities from the United Kingdom, in order to award Master’s degrees with “of Arts/of Science” added.