



Center for
Higher Education
Policy Studies

New Degrees in the Netherlands

Evaluation of the Bachelor–Master Structure and Accreditation in Dutch Higher Education

FINAL REPORT

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Preface

Governments across Europe are increasingly paying attention to the implementation of the Bologna objectives as they search for effective policies that enhance their higher education degrees, accountability and quality assurance, international cooperation and mobility.

This document presents the results of a study on the introduction of the bachelor-master structure and accreditation in the Netherlands. The study has been initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW in Dutch) to comply with the legal obligation to evaluate new legislation five years after its initial implementation. The study has been undertaken by a research team at the Center for Higher Education policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, the Netherlands that performed a (meta-)analysis of existing evaluation reports and other relevant information and databases. Additionally, a limited number of interviews were held with major stakeholders in the Netherlands and with experts in some European countries to study the reception of the new Dutch higher education structures in society and abroad.

This document covers all major aspects of reform involved and makes policy recommendations for some of them:

- Degree reform in the universities
- Degree reform in the hbo sector
- Transitions from bachelor to master study programmes
- Degrees and labour market
- Internationalisation and mobility
- Life-long learning and qualification frameworks
- Accreditation

Overall, the study shows that the Netherlands is among the countries that quickly restructured their degrees towards the two cycles of the Bologna Declaration and that the new system can be seen as quite successful in terms of educational content, application of ECTS and access to the master cycle.

This document is the product of a successful, collaborative effort between the research team at CHEPS, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and an International Expert Panel. The study team would like to thank the members of the International Panel, Marijk van der Wende, Sybille Reichert, Nick Harris and Jim Allen, for their stimulating criticism and support.

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Jürgen Enders
Director of CHEPS

0 Executive summary

0.1 The study

The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to evaluate the laws on the reform of higher education degrees towards the bachelor–master structure and on the reform of quality assurance towards a programme accreditation system of 2002. The study consists mainly of a meta-evaluation of previous evaluative reports, produced in the framework of monitoring the introduction process and investigating issues that arose during the transition. Additionally, a limited number of interviews were held with major stakeholders in the Netherlands and with experts in some European countries to study the reception of the new Dutch higher education structures in society and abroad. The international perspective is especially relevant, because the reform laws were instigated by the Bologna process, which aims at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The main goals of the reforms were:

- Increased recognition of Dutch higher education abroad (in the framework of the Bologna process);
- Flexibility and freedom of choice for students;
- Smooth transitions between higher education and the labour market.

At this time, over five years after introduction of the reforms, the transition phase is over but impacts only begin to show, so that definitive answers to many evaluation questions cannot yet be given.

0.2 The reforms in general

The Netherlands is among the countries that quickly restructured their degrees towards the two cycles (undergraduate-graduate, or bachelor–master) of the 1999 Bologna Declaration. With very few exceptions, even in the complicated area of medicine etc., all study programmes in Dutch higher education have been brought under the new degree structure. The transition process was on the whole rapid and smooth, although in the beginning there were some negative side-effects associated with the great speed of transition, such as poor information to students. The reform of

the degree system moved gradually in a quite positive direction. From a European perspective, the new system can be seen as quite successful in terms of educational content, application of ECTS (replacing the previous study point system by the European Credit Transfer System), access to the master cycle, etc.

0.3 Degree reform in the universities

Regarding innovation of the curricula in the universities, the idea of a simple 'cut' of the previous drs./mr./ir.-study programmes gave way to more differentiation, both at the bachelor and at the master levels. The majority of bachelor programmes remain rather specialised, but some broad programmes have been established, e.g. in the 'colleges' of the Universities of Utrecht and Maastricht. Another broadening of learning in the bachelor phase has been the introduction of major-minor systems since the 1990s.

At the master level, next to normal 60 EC study programmes (120 EC in sciences and engineering, 180 EC in medicine c.a.), universities initiated 'top' master programmes, as well as research master programmes. Only research masters, of which there are more than 100, are accredited as such and have a size of 120 EC even in areas that normally have 60 EC-masters. The number of master programmes in universities is high, though in recent years there has been somewhat of a decrease. A shared overall vision with regard to the desired character of master programmes and hence their number seems to be lacking in the country. One-year master programmes regularly encounter problems in cooperating internationally for joint degrees with countries that have two-year masters themselves.

Recognising that a discussion on the length of the master programmes has taken place recently, we recommend developing a more coherent national vision on breadth and profiles of master programmes offered in the Netherlands, including those in the hbo sector.¹ Regarding the university sector, the discussion should address at least: (1) the desired characters and number of master programmes, connected to (2) the place of 'top master' programmes, as well as (3) hindrances to full cooperation in joint degree programmes.

¹ The term 'hbo' in this report will be used for the 'universities of applied science', '*hoger beroepsonderwijs*' in Dutch.

0.4 Degree reform in the hbo sector

Most of the impact of the degree reform has been on the university sector, as for the hbo sector little changed: its 240 EC (European credits) programmes remained as bachelor programmes.

The recognition and development of master programmes in the hbo sector has not had a quick start, also due to the government's funding arrangements, under which as a rule university master programmes are funded, while those in hbo institutions are not. In some areas, master programmes have been established (e.g. advanced nursing).

The Dutch discussion about the different titles associated with hbo degrees (e.g. B.Eng.) and those of university degrees (e.g. B.Sc.) is not much recognised abroad: in countries with binary systems, the Dutch binary line is interpreted close to their own, while in countries with a unitary system, the distinctions are more or less ignored.

0.5 Transitions from bachelor to master study programmes

The bachelor–master degree system has stimulated mobility between study programmes at the moment of transition from the bachelor to the master cycles. While in the university sector most students stay in the same set of study programmes (around 85% in 2005/2006), change of faculties and institutions increases, also across the 'binary line' distinguishing universities from hbo institutions. In 2006/2007, around 11% of students entering university master programmes held a bachelor degree from another university. Moreover, university master programmes enrol a substantial number of hbo bachelor degree holders, currently probably close to 20% of the total master enrolment in Dutch universities. Finally, there is also a substantial enrolment of foreign students (around 25% of master students?). Enrolment in Dutch university master programmes is, in sum, very heterogeneous.

Students with bachelor degrees from other fields, both from universities and from hbo institutions, usually have to complete a 'pre-master' programme of as a rule 30 EC to gain the needed competencies to enter the master programme. This practice is now becoming well-structured. Increasing cooperation between hbo institutions and universities in counselling students during their bachelor cycle is another positive sign of making the transition more transparent and smooth.²

² Cooperation is fully possible under the current law; merger between universities and hbo institutions is not, although development of comprehensive higher education institutions is an option in some other countries.

Notwithstanding the presence of pre-master programmes, the enrolment criteria for master programmes are in terms of candidates' required competences and knowledge for success in the different master programmes are not articulated very well in most universities; institutional admission strategies are largely lacking. Admission strategies would also include views on optimal numbers of students in master programmes. We recommend the higher education institutions to take this issue up in the near future.

A peculiarity of the Dutch degree system is the existence of 'continuation masters' (*doorstroommasters*) in universities with a guaranteed right of access for its 'own' bachelor graduates. The existence of continuation master programmes is connected to the absence of a 'hard cut' (*harde knip*) between bachelor and master programmes. A 'hard cut' means that only students who have fulfilled *all* requirements for the bachelor degree can enrol in a masters' programme. Until now, this option has been unpopular in order to keep the transition from bachelor to master smooth for the programme's 'own' students. Applying a 'hard cut' would have several benefits, it is argued. First, all capable students would have equal chances of entering master programmes, thus increasing mobility across faculties, higher education institutions, sectors and countries. Moreover, the 'hard cut' would underline the university bachelor degree as a degree in its own right, giving access to master programmes, to the labour market, and being regarded as a 'passport' for mobility. Applying an admission strategy including a 'hard cut' also stimulates students to finish their bachelor degree on time (improvement of *studievoortgang*). We recommend strengthening the position and meaning of the university bachelor degree by abandoning the obligation to offer 'continuation master' programmes; such a concept does not exist in mature bachelor-master systems abroad (USA, UK, etc.). As a telling example, also in Switzerland an obligatory 'continuation master' type of programmes was introduced after the Bologna Declaration, but has recently been made optional for reasons like those discussed in the Netherlands: strengthening the position of the bachelor degree and stimulating mobility. Swiss higher education institutions now may offer distinctive options to student with regard to enrolment into master programmes, with or without selection.

Introducing a 'hard cut' should be accompanied by (1) better articulation of the admission strategy, including actual rather than formal requirements on entering students in master programmes (*instroomeisen*) and (2) measures to minimise delay for students (e.g. avoiding long waiting times after completion of pre-master tracks by offering entry to master programmes every semester).

0.6 Degrees and labour market

The change to the bachelor–master degree system does not seem to have had an impact on the retention rate of students; the percentage of drop-outs is unchanged over the bachelor phase both in hbo institutions and in universities.

The university bachelor degree is not yet seen as an entry qualification to the labour market in the Netherlands. This is not in line with the expectations from the Bologna Declaration, however understandable it is that actors find it difficult to give the new degree type a place in the labour market. First statistics suggest that university bachelors entering the labour market (around 5% of university bachelors) nevertheless have the same high job chances as other university degree holders.

0.7 Internationalisation and mobility

International experts are overall quite positive about the quality of the Dutch higher education system, about mobility possibilities to and from the Netherlands, as well as about Dutch students' competencies compared to students from many other European countries.

The new degree system has not led to an increase in international mobility since 2004. The Netherlands is slightly below the EU average in terms of the proportion of incoming international students.

0.8 Life-long learning and qualification frameworks

A more flexible higher education system with shorter degree courses should facilitate its inclusion in a life-long learning system. The OECD review of Dutch higher education in 2007 criticised the Netherlands' lack of development in this respect. A further condition for an integrated life-long learning system is the development of an encompassing qualifications framework. The Netherlands is not in the forefront of developing a national qualifications framework based on the European frameworks developed in and around the Bologna process. We recommend speeding up the development of the Netherlands' qualifications framework.

0.9 Accreditation

The accreditation system in place since 2003 has successfully built on the previously-existing quality assurance scheme. It assures basic quality and in recent years has made

a beginning with recognising special qualities of study programmes. Abroad, it is seen by most as highly credible and rigorous, thus assisting mobility of Dutch students and graduates in the EHEA.

As discussions on a new design for it are underway, with a lighter touch approach and more responsibilities for the higher education institutions themselves, there is no need to treat the accreditation system in greater depth here.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and aims of the study

This study has been initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW in Dutch) to comply with the legal obligation to evaluate new legislation five years after its initial implementation, in this case the introduction of the bachelor–master structure and accreditation in the Netherlands. The study (meta-)analyses existing evaluation reports and other relevant information and databases. In 2002-2003 two new laws came into effect that had a major impact on Dutch higher education:

- The law of 6 June 2002 (Stb. 303) that introduced the bachelor–master system.
- The law of 6 June 2002 (Stb. 302) that introduced accreditation in Dutch higher education.

These laws have been promulgated at the same time as the subjects are heavily interrelated. Inspired by the European Bologna process, the bachelor–master system implied the introduction of a new system of degrees in Dutch higher education—or perhaps we should say a return to the oldest system of degrees, because bachelor and master could already be recognised in the statutes of the University of Paris in the year 1215 (Leff, 1992, p. 325; Rüegg, 1992, p. 8). The system with *doctorandus* as the main degree³ developed slowly in Dutch higher education since the late 19th century and only came to full development after World War II (Groen, 1987, p. 71).

With the degree change additional instruments came along, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), Diploma Supplement (DS) and—in a separate change of the higher education law, as we just mentioned—new ways of quality assurance. The new accreditation scheme was meant to assure that Dutch quality assurance, based on minimum standards would meet international agreements on transparency, quality and transferability of degrees.

³ *Doctorandus* had been the designation for students about to become a full doctor since at least the 17th century (e.g. de Ridder-Symoens, 1992, p. 197), and is still in use in Flanders. As a degree, the doctoral examination (rather than the final promotion) was given civil effect from 1876 onwards; as a person's title it was abbreviated to *drs.* In the broad area of engineering, the equivalent was *ingenieur* (*ir.* for university-level engineers, *ing.* for hbo engineers); in law, the degree was *meester* (*mr.*).

Both laws are now subject to an integrated objective evaluation process. Our evaluation, five years after the actual introduction of bachelor–master degrees and accreditation across the higher education system compares the current state of affairs with the policy aims at the time of introduction. A major source of evaluation criteria can be derived from the explanatory memoranda of the two laws (*Memorie van toelichting*) of 2001, and mainly for the introduction process from the formulation by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2003 in its *IJkpuntenbrief* informing the parties in the higher education system of the issues that would guide the Minister's policy as well as the monitoring and evaluation of the bachelor–master structure (Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2003, p. 30). These documents set aims for the later state of affairs, but also held a number of boundary conditions for the transition process from the old system (with its drs./mr./ir./ing.-degrees and quality assurance without accreditation) to the new one. In the monitoring of the transition process, obviously most attention went to the boundary conditions rather than to longer-term aims. In our report, the emphasis should be more on the longer-term aims than on the transition conditions.

In its broadest formulation, the changes in Dutch higher education at the turn of the century were intended to 'offer students more choice and give institutions leeway to develop education that is open, flexible and internationally oriented' ("Memorie van Toelichting, ... bachelor-masterstructuur in het hoger onderwijs," 2001--our translation). Openness and flexibility were put into the perspective of life-long learning, with learners moving repeatedly between study and work—or both in part-time simultaneously—from the beginning. The other major perspective was that of internationalisation: Dutch higher education had to become more attractive for foreign students, and chances for Dutch students and graduates internationally should increase. The introduction of the bachelor–master structure is one of the means to these ends. A harmonised credit system (ECTS) is another, mentioned in the Bologna Declaration as well, as are the more traditional means of internationalisation such as EU-Directives for some regulated professions and international covenants for degree recognition, in particular the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The main goals for the accreditation system are (summarised in: *Inspectie van het Onderwijs*, 2005b, p. 10):

- § Improve the international position of Dutch higher education;
- § Transparency of the quality of education;
- § Independent position of quality assurance;

- § Clarity with regard to administrative consequences of lack of quality;
- § Assurance of quality in privately funded (*'aangewezen'*)⁴ higher education;
- § Visibility of the pluriformity and different profiles of higher education institutions.

In addition to evaluating the laws on the basis of their original objectives, this study focuses on the dynamics and new, unanticipated developments that emerged after the introduction of the bachelor–master and accreditation systems in the Netherlands. What have been typical reactions of higher education institutions and other stakeholders and what counter-effects have become visible 5–6 years after introducing the two laws? What future developments of bachelor–master and accreditation can be expected in terms of the internal dynamics in the higher education system and the relationship between higher education and the wider society?

Finally, the current evaluation study gives an international comparative view: how do Dutch developments compare with wider European movements? Have the legal changes contributed to a better perception of and international trust in Dutch higher education abroad?

1.2 Research questions and report structure

In the previous section, the main goals for the new policies have been summarised. Elaborating the evaluation aims into the research questions as given in the sources mentioned results in an unwieldy, long list of questions. Without losing either the main aims or the questions posed originally from sight, we will use a three-fold structure for the remainder of this report: first, evaluation questions around the bachelor–master reform will be addressed (sub-divided in original and emerging issues), then we turn to the accreditation reform and finally we look at international aspects.

1.2.1 Bachelor and master degrees, original evaluation questions

First, we bring the evaluation questions around the degree structure together; this will make up chapter 2. Under this heading, we will start (§ 2.1) by treating briefly the main questions of the transition process. In particular, we will look at:

⁴ Henceforth, for brevity we shall use 'privately funded' to denote the non-publicly funded but recognised higher education institutions (*'aangewezen onderwijs'*), and 'publicly funded' for the higher education institutions funded from the public budget (*'bekostigd onderwijs'*).

1. The speed and smoothness of introduction of the new degree structure, i.e.
 - a. the proportion of programmes transformed into the bachelor–master structure, and
 - b. the extent to which the previous university programmes were divided into two phases (bachelor and master) without creating completely new programmes.
2. Students' interests in a smooth transition, focusing on
 - a. proper information about the consequences of the transition,
 - b. decent transition into the new system for students who started in the old structure, and
 - c. the consequences with regard to individual study planning should remain limited as much as possible.

The main interest in our study is, however, the impact of introducing the bachelor and master degree system on the Dutch higher education system as it is at this moment (first half of 2008). The issues mentioned in the *MvT's*, the *IJkpuntenbrief* etc. that are relevant from this perspective will be grouped in chapter 2 as follows.

§ 2.2 will focus on curriculum innovation in terms of course content, especially in the bachelor phase in universities:

1. Curriculum innovation when introducing bachelor and master cycles rather than simply 'cutting up' the old study programmes in 3+1 or 3+2 years, without creating completely new study programmes,
2. Development of 'broad bachelor' study programmes, reduction in the number of bachelor programmes,
3. Introduction of major-minor models to increase options for students

The outcome of the degree reform should be—focusing on the Netherlands for the moment—a higher education system that is flexible, with freedom of choice for students, and with smooth transitions to the labour market. These questions, in terms of (numerical) throughput and output, are addressed in § 2.3:

1. Flexibility and freedom of choice for students
 - a. Can every university bachelor student enter at least one master programme without selection?
 - b. What are arrangements for entry of students from other university programmes and disciplines into master programmes?
 - c. Can hbo⁵ bachelor graduates enter master programmes in universities with fewer hindrances and delays than before?
 - d. Efficiency gains are expected:⁶

⁵ The term 'hbo' in this report will be used for the 'universities of applied science', '*hoger beroepsonderwijs*' in Dutch.

- i) Students obtain bachelor degrees instead of dropping out
 - ii) More efficiency in master phase expected due to more differentiation
 - iii) More master-level graduates (university + hbo)
2. Smooth transition between higher education and the labour market, where the main interest is in employment for university bachelor degree holders.

The other goals mentioned in the original policy statements, i.e. the Explanatory Memorandum (*Memorie van Toelichting*) and the *IJkpuntenbrief*, have to do with the international acceptance of the new degrees, which we will treat in chapter 4.

1.2.2 Bachelor and master degrees, emerging issues

After the debate about the introduction of the bachelor–master degree system, the implementation process started and had its own dynamics, leading to the emergence of perhaps unexpected issues. Moreover, the Bologna process also had its own dynamics with the addition of new matters to the reforms (e.g. realising that the reform of the first and second cycles would have impact on the third, Ph.D. phase). Some of the main issues arising in the course of time will be addressed in § 2.4. In fact, the *IJkpunten* letter foreshadowed a large proportion of the emerging issues, beyond the immediate goals as mentioned in the laws. Major emerging issues, not covered above, include the following:

1. Transition from hbo bachelor to university master and the development of pre-master programmes and the like;
2. Diversity of master programmes, especially the development of ‘top’ masters and Research Masters variants, but also master programmes in hbo institutions;
3. The developments towards a third cycle and the development of professional doctorates;
4. The development of short higher education programmes (associate degrees).

1.2.3 Accreditation

Concerning accreditation, a number of questions have been raised specifically, based on the original aims in the law of 2002. Some questions are intertwined with those on international issues (and can be found in chapter 4). Other questions are about the operation and impact of the accreditation system. These will be addressed in chapter 3:

1. Support and credibility for accreditation by an independent organisation;

⁶ The issue of efficiency arose later, it was not prominent in either the *MvT* or the *IJkpuntenbrief*, but it fits best in this place in the report.

2. Transparency through clearly reasoned judgements on the quality of study programmes;
3. A diverse quality assurance system because several organisations can perform site visits [external evaluations];
4. Clarity about administrative consequences in case of too low quality;
5. Assurance of quality of privately funded higher education (*'aangewezen onderwijs'*);
6. Efficient and effective accreditation system;
7. Improvement of quality and effectiveness of accreditation in Dutch-Flemish cooperation.

1.2.4 *International comparison of the reforms in Dutch higher education*

A major drive for the 2002 legal changes came from the Bologna process, setting the introduction of bachelor–master degrees and accreditation squarely in an international perspective. The international aspect is therefore of prime importance in this evaluation. Two types of questions were raised in the international comparative perspective. First there were questions about the comparative state of affairs (how does the Dutch situation compare with the situation in other countries involved in the Bologna process?). Second, there were questions concerning the reception of the reforms in the Netherlands in foreign higher education systems. This gives us a threefold structure for the comparative chapter:

- Comparative state of affairs regarding the bachelor–master degree reform;
- Comparative state of affairs regarding the accreditation reform;
- Reception questions.

With regard to the degree reform, 'state of affair' questions will be treated in § 4.2:⁷ What happened with relation to the implementation of Bachelor–master in the Bologna process in Europe? And does the Netherlands occupy a leading position in the European developments?

1. How does the transition in the Netherlands compare with other countries? What is the state of affairs with regard to the international orientation and recognition of Dutch higher education?
 - a. Are all measures needed for that implemented in the Netherlands (e.g. ECTS, Diploma Supplement)?

⁷ In § 4.1 we will give a brief account of the Bologna process as a backdrop to the rest of this chapter.

- b. Are legal frameworks adapted to (double and) joint degrees? And is there sufficient compatibility of Dutch study programmes with those in other EHEA-countries to facilitate (double and) joint degrees?
2. What is the situation regarding European curriculum innovation projects?
3. What are effects on international student mobility?

In the catalogue of questions for evaluation, one set of questions that belongs here will not receive an answer for lack of data. For completeness' sake they will be mentioned here—in the hope of stimulating a next evaluation study:

4. Recognition of Dutch higher education abroad
 - a. From statistics it should appear that bachelor and master degrees are recognised in Europe and abroad at the right level (esp. in the USA and Australia).
 - b. Compatibility of titles attached to degrees.
 - c. Acceptance of the level of Dutch graduates in the Netherlands and abroad, as seen in accreditation reports and labour market figures

The accreditation reform is the subject matter of § 4.3: What happened with relation to the implementation of accreditation in the Bologna process in Europe? How does the transition in the Netherlands compare with other countries? In particular, did it result in:

1. Strong international position for Dutch higher education;
2. Strengthening of trust in Dutch higher education abroad;
3. International compatibility of study programmes based on quality rather than on formal characteristics;
4. Mutual recognition of quality assurance systems?

The reception of Dutch higher education abroad will be indicated through opinions of experts in higher education in a number of European countries that are either neighbouring countries of the Netherlands or are often seen as models for policy development, i.e. Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom. In the section (§ 4.4) reporting on the interviews we held with them, the underlying issue is the level of trust in the international community of Dutch higher education, degrees and graduates in terms of quality and credibility. Specifically we will look at:

1. Are the Dutch hbo and university titles understood and recognised abroad in the right way? How are Dutch degrees valued in terms of degree recognition for further academic study and at the international labour market?
2. What are the opinions about mobility to and from the Netherlands, apart from the (legal) conditions mentioned before:

- a. Programme offer and proficiency of students and staff in English
 - b. Hindrances to cross-country mobility
3. Did the reforms result in students who have the necessary competences to be mobile both for further study and for the European labour market?

In the *IJkpuntenbrief* explicitly no quantifiable targets were formulated. That makes our evaluation more difficult, but also more nuanced in terms of impacts of the legal reforms. In addition to these criteria for the evaluation, some further stimuli have to be mentioned, such as the national agenda relating to the expected shortage of highly-educated employees (SER 2000 and CPB 2001). For this reason, the Committee that worked on the establishment of the bachelor–master system particularly emphasised the issue of flexibility in Dutch higher education (Onderwijsraad, 2000). Flexibility was stressed also to stimulate life-long learning. In its recent review of Dutch higher education, the OECD (2007) again pointed at the weak life-long learning structure in the Netherlands.

1.3 Methodological remarks

An added value of our (meta-)evaluation compared with previous evaluative reports is to particularly look at the *effects* or *impacts* of the bachelor–master structure and the accreditation system, rather than only look at the *implementation* process.

Evaluators should not fall into the trap of viewing the introduction of bachelor–master degrees and of accreditation as ends in themselves (Rogers, 2008); they are means to the ends associated with the Netherlands' position in the emergence of the EHEA. We already mentioned that we should not focus too much on the transition process anymore, but rather on the current state of affairs, with first results and possibly some first indications of impacts of the two laws. In achieving results and impacts, other instruments (and reforms) play a role as well, besides the two laws (e.g. the Lisbon Recognition Convention with its Diploma Supplement or visa policies for foreign students). Methodologically, that raises the question how much of ensuing changes in the higher education system should be ascribed to which instrument—if to any instrument at all.

Moreover, making these policy measures a success depends not only on Parliament proclaiming a law, or on the Ministry of OCW sending out circular letters, but also on cooperation by other government agencies such as the NVAO, by other organisations in the higher education system (universities and hbo institutions, evaluation agencies, recognition agencies, etc.) and by individuals (students and graduates) (Uusikylä &

Valovirta, 2007; Witte, 2006). Implementation, and even more so impacts, should therefore be studied by taking into account other actors' contributions to the policy. This will be done both by including documents stating views and activities of these other actors, and by interviewing them.

Two more technical remarks concern the statistics. First, some five years after the introduction of the bachelor–master degrees is too early to see its results documented in statistics that are stable enough to think of successes or trends. When it comes to impacts, we are still in the transition period, with students still graduating for their 'old-type' degrees besides students graduating with bachelor and master degrees. On the labour market, students with bachelor and master degrees are now only beginning to appear. In fact, this is not just a remark about statistics but about the timing of the evaluation project: in many respects we are too early to judge impacts of the reforms, though too late to tarry with the transition process.

Second, there is not a single, authoritative source that gives us all the necessary data. Different studies report different figures from different sources. Where possible, we have used authoritative figures from CBS or from the umbrella organisations VSNU and hbo raad. However, our study largely is a meta-evaluation, building on existing studies rather than doing our own data collection; accordingly we are bound to using these different data sources. Even though we tried to use consistent data as much as possible, some inconsistencies remain. We advise readers not to put too much emphasis on exact numbers, but focus on the broad trends.

2 Introduction and impact of bachelor and master degrees

In this first empirical chapter we cover the research questions related to the introduction of the bachelor and master degrees, and the impacts of the new degrees on the higher education structure and students. To structure and cover all the relevant questions mentioned in chapter 1 this chapter consists of 4 parts. Section 2.1 deals with the transition from the 'old' structure towards the bachelor–master structure. Section 2.2 discusses effects on curricula, followed by section 2.3 on transition from higher education to the labour market. Finally, section 2.4 discusses the (unexpected) dynamics generated by the implementation of the bachelor–master structure in Dutch higher education.

2.1 The transition towards the bachelor master system in Dutch higher education

In this section we discuss the extent to which the traditional Dutch study programmes have been translated into the bachelor–master structure, the information provided to students and the extent to which bachelor graduates can enrol in master programmes.

2.1.1 *The proportion of programmes translated into the bachelor–master structure*

By 2004, less than two years after the introduction of the law, 90% of the study programmes had been restructured. The transition went so fast that the Inspectorate doubted the meticulousness of the process, especially regarding the participation from within the institutions in discussing the plans (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, 2005c, p. 9). By 2006, there were 29 single-cycle study programmes (*'ongedeelde opleidingen'*) left, mostly in the area of medicine and veterinary science; in 2007, practically all study programmes had been restructured (Ministerie OCW, 2007).

In the medical disciplines, though, adoption of the bachelor–master was not straightforward, due to the international regulations affecting the profession (Meyboom-de Jong, Schmit Jongbloed, & Willemsen, 2002). In 2008, only the University of Rotterdam does not yet have the Bachelor–master structure for its medical programmes. The universities of Utrecht, Groningen, Amsterdam (both universities), Maastricht and Nijmegen have implemented the bachelor–master structure or will start with it in the academic year 2008-2009. The situation is similar for the studies dentistry

and veterinary medicine. Because of the special character of these studies in the broad area of medicine, they are structured on a three years' bachelor programme followed by a three years' master programme.

Tab. 1 Number of accredited study programmes by higher education sector, in April 2008

	hbo	university	Total
Bachelor	512	347	859
Master	177	715	892
Total	689	1062	1751

Source: www.nvao.net

Note: these figures include all positive accreditation decisions, including privately funded higher education institutions, part-time studies, etc.

The table (Tab. 1) shows that most programmes (61%) accredited and taught⁸ in Dutch higher education are found in universities, although the majority of students (over 65%) study at hbo institutions (*'hogescholen'*). This means that on average, university study programmes have less than half the number of students as hbo study programmes. The balance between bachelor and master programmes is quite different across the subsectors: the hbo sector mostly has bachelor programmes and the universities have more master programmes.

2.1.1.1 The extent to which the previous university programmes are divided into two phases (bachelor and master) without creating completely new programmes.

For the publicly-funded hbo institutions the introduction of the bachelor–master model did not lead to major changes, as the previously existing programmes were automatically recognised as 'new-style' bachelor programmes until re-accreditation was due (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003b). The universities took the transition towards the bachelor–master system as a chance to change the content of their curricula (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, p. 18). Generally speaking the former four-year single-cycle studies have been divided in a bachelor of nominally three years (180 EC) and a master programme of one year (60 EC). The former five year studies

⁸ Using the NVAO's list of accredited study programmes weeds out most 'sleeping' programmes (programmes without students, for which higher education providers did not want to spend the money to try to get an accreditation); however, it may miss over a hundred of study programmes not yet accredited because they have *de jure* accreditation until the end of 2009.

have been transformed into three-plus-two year programmes, i.e. 180 EC bachelor programmes followed by a 120 EC master phase.

Dutch higher education by and large chose a model of specialised master programmes. After the bachelor–master introduction there were fewer master programmes than there had been graduation specialisations (*‘afstudeerrichtingen’*) (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c) inside the old-style programmes. Currently there are about twice as many master programmes as bachelor programmes (interview05-08).⁹ Furthermore for every bachelor programme there is at least one linked ‘continuation’ master programme.

The Inspectorate investigated the Parliament’s requirement, mentioned in the *Ijkkuntenbrief* (Staatssecretaris hoger onderwijs, 2003), prohibiting universities from setting up professionally-oriented programmes belonging to post-initial training or competing with hbo programmes, because that would create unfair competition (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c). The Inspectorate did not directly answer the question of master programmes had an academic or professional tendency; that judgement was left to the accreditation organisation (NVAO, see next chapter). Out of 49 university master programmes selected for investigation, only in one case was the Inspectorate not convinced that it was made out of a previously existing programme. That programme was closed by the institution (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004b; Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2004).

2.1.2 *Information to students about the consequences of the bachelor–master structure transition*

The question if ‘Students [are]... informed properly about the consequences of the transition and what they can do after their studies in terms of further education’ figured conspicuously in the first years of the bachelor–master transition. The Inspectorate concluded that in their enthusiasm to change rapidly towards the new degree structure, higher education institutions were well-organised with regard to information but study programmes sometimes were not sufficiently clear in their information about students’ possibilities to transfer to the new structure and about the

⁹ Exact counts of programmes are difficult, as the major data base, CROHO, until the completion of the first round of programme accreditations will remain ‘polluted’ with ‘sleeping’ study programmes, which had been recognised previously but were not actually offered to students, expected to exist mainly in private higher education institutions (*‘aangewezen instellingen’*). Moreover, the IB-Groep, the operator of the CROHO database, depends on the higher education institutions for its data (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2008a).

possibilities for further study associated with a particular bachelor degree (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, p. 55, 2004a, p. 29). However, even at that time the information supplied by higher education institutions was considered as 'sometimes brief but sufficiently transparent' and students stated they were satisfied with the information (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2007, p. 10). Study councillors in the higher education institutions were seen as dependable and helpful in informing students (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004a, p. 29).

After those first years, the question lost some of its pertinence, although the issue of transition paths between bachelor and master programmes, especially if they are not the 'standard', 'consecutive' programmes (*'doorstroommaster'*), has remained of interest, however. For instance, the Studychoice website now incorporates a special module with the aim of collecting all available information on this issue in the country to assist students in preparing for switching to non-consecutive master programmes.¹⁰

2.2 Curriculum innovation in terms of course content

2.2.1 Curriculum innovation rather than 'cutting up'

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, there is a noteworthy, albeit unsurprising, difference in the curriculum reforms which took place in the hbo institutions compared with the universities (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003b, p. 18). In the hbo institutions, 57% believe that the curriculum has not changed; in the case of universities, instead, 80% believe that the curriculum has changed in part and 16% that the curriculum has changed entirely. This is not surprising because the hbo studies already lasted four years before the bachelor – master reform, which made the transition more an administrative issue for them. But for university studies the duration of separate programmes changed with changing the previous programmes into two cycles (bachelor and master). Therefore more programme innovation was needed in university programmes (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003b, p. 225).

The same document reported that according to respondents the main changes in the hbo sector included a stronger 'work-field orientation', a more applicative and multidisciplinary nature of the curriculum aside with talks of introducing greater differentiation (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003b, p. 18). A move towards more competency-based learning was also a continuing trend in the hbo sector (Witte, 2006,

¹⁰ See: www.studiekeuze123.nl/web/site/default.aspx?m=bachelor-mastersaansluitingen.

p. 251). In contrast, the new university bachelors were considered less specialised and more multidisciplinary in nature whilst the new university master programmes led to stronger specialisation and more pronounced research orientation.

The bachelor–master reform gave an impulse to the already existing trend of introducing ‘major-minor’ models in the Netherlands, i.e. curricula in which a main subject or discipline is combined with a coherent ‘package’ of modules in one or more other subjects or disciplines (possibly in different higher education institutions, domestic or foreign) chosen as a block by the student.

Further room for curriculum innovation is available in the sense that many bachelor programmes were seen to demand less than full-time study from most students (Commissie ‘Ruim baan voor talent’, 2007; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004a, p. 12, 2008a, 2008b; van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingeren et al., 2007).

Despite the variety of master programme offerings (and their nomenclature), as yet there have been few substantive changes at this level. The Inspection’s report *De Master Meester?* suggested as the main reason for the lack of innovation that the government did not stimulate curriculum change and that universities must obtain approval by the Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) when developing new master programmes (Ministerie OCW, 2007). Besides, to the extent that curriculum innovation took place in the master cycle, attention was focused on the development of research and top masters often besides (mostly) one-year master programmes, deemed too short to realise the ambitions of the various stakeholders, including the government, universities, and students (Ibid, page 33). In particular, it was commented from the field that a one-year master programme does not allow time for an internship (*‘stage’*) or stay abroad, which in turn was one of the major problems Dutch study programmes faced in the international cooperation for joint master programmes (see § 4.1.5).

Finally, the bachelor–master reforms have increased the workload of examination committees, which according to the Inspection could lead to risks of arbitrary decisions and infringements on students’ rights (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, page 28).

2.2.2 *‘Broad bachelors’, fewer bachelor programmes*

In universities, the traditional ‘long degree’ leading to the *doctorandus* degree had to be split. At first, participants perceived that requirements were to make a direct translation of the first years of ‘old-style’ *drs.*-programmes into bachelor programmes (interview 05-08), thus reducing the stress of change but also reducing the opportunity

to innovate. However, the reforms in the university sector have led to some important innovations. In particular, the bachelor–master arrangements gave an impulse to the already ongoing process of renewal which involved the idea (in both the hbo and university sectors) of a first broad phase followed by a specialist phase of study (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, p. 15; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, p. 33; Witte, 2006, pp. 230-231).

The idea of a very broad bachelor is based on the liberal arts tradition, that is, a broad training programme across disciplines within which students can make choices. Students are selected in an intense process in which motivation plays a major role; English is the language of instruction. The introduction of broad bachelor programmes in the university colleges of Utrecht and Maastricht were not directly connected with the bachelor–master reform (interview 05-27), although the degree reform may have sparked off additional interest in their development (interviews 05-14a, 05-16a). The two universities in Amsterdam announced in 2008 that they would open a college in 2009 (www.auc.nl/aboutauc).

Such a broad, multi-disciplinary bachelor cycle should be followed by greater differentiation and specialisation at the master level. However, the increased demands on specialised masters implied that the breadth of the bachelors was harder to accomplish (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2007, p. 28). As a consequence, broad bachelors remain a small part of the offer and do not (yet) replace the more specialised first-cycle programmes (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, p. 21).

Increasingly, Dutch higher education institutions wish to cater for the different talent levels and ambitions of their students. Calls for more ‘challenging’ study programmes are translated not only into the colleges mentioned in the previous subsection, but also in ‘honours programmes’, ‘master classes’ etc. These distinctive streams were not explicitly part of our evaluation, but should be noted as new forms of diversity in the bachelor cycle, and as one of the measures against uniformity (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2008b, pp. 9, 35). Development of a more ambitious culture of study is one of the Minister’s aims (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, p. 12), and would address a weakness common to many Dutch students in international experts’ eyes (see § 4.4.3).

2.3 Throughput and output: flexibility and degrees

The ‘proof of the pudding’ of the bachelor–master degree reform should be retrievable in figures too: the degrees must be awarded, and there were expectations in advance

about which and how many. In the early history of the Dutch discussion about the bachelor–master system, the VSNU voiced its fear, for instance, that too few students would continue to the master cycle after obtaining a bachelor degree (Witte, 2006, p. 222). In this section, we shall look at the—until now few—available figures on degree attainment and transition to the labour market. The number of students enrolling in university bachelor programmes has been stable over 2004–2006 at around 37.500 per year.¹¹ In hbo institutions, in the same years 87.000–89.000 new bachelor students entered the system. In 2005/2006, in total 27.800 students started a master study programme in Dutch universities. A year later, numbers had risen to almost 39.800. The rapid rise is explained by the fact that only ‘fast’ students with university bachelor degrees enrolled in 2005/2006. In hbo institutions the number of new master students had been stable at around 5.000 but dropped with circa 500 in 2007/2008.

2.3.1 *Retention of students and bachelor degree attainment*

The introduction of the bachelor–master structure was expected to lead to efficiency gains in terms of students getting bachelor degrees instead of dropping out in the master cycle, due to increased programme differentiation.

Numerical efficiency of study has been on the Dutch political agenda since the early 1980s at least (Bijleveld, 1989, 1993). It was assumed the bachelor–master system would increase the higher education system’s retention rate. This would translate into (1) more students getting their bachelor degree instead of dropping out and (2) more students obtaining their degrees in the master phase due to more differentiation (Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2003). However, statistical data do not show a significant increase in the number or percentage of retention throughout the country (see Tab. 2), and this percentage has been stable for the last twenty years (Ministerie OCW, 2007, p. 33).

Due to a lack of recent and comprehensive data it is impossible to determine how the retention figures are related to the introduction of the bachelor–master system. For example, growing numbers of enrolment (+14% in the hbo sector in four years; +7% in the university sector in 2 years), in general mean an increase in less-prepared students, which would lead to a decrease in retention rates. Maybe—but this is speculative

¹¹ Figures on university enrolment in this paragraph from: www.vsnu.nl/web/show/id=96658/langid=43/framenoid=41685/langid=43/secure=false, accessed 2008-07-21; for hbo enrolment see <http://www.hbo-raad.nl/?id=137&t=kenget>, accessed 2008-07-21. The umbrella organisations give higher estimates than the CBS figures in tab. 2 although all are based on the CRIHO administration.

without further research—it is a positive effect of the bachelor–master reform that this negative tendency was counterbalanced.

Tab. 2 Percentage of student retention in relation to the number of new enrolments

Year	Entering bachelor students (number)	Retention %		
	hbo	After 1 year	After 2 years	After 3 years
2001	67.200	84	81	80
2002	66.700	87	83	82
2003	72.600	87	83	81
2004	76.200	86	82	
2005	76.900	86		
University				
2003	34.000	94	92	90
2004	35.900	93	90	
2005	36.300	93		

Source: CBS, 2007 page 191.

Regarding the efficiency of study, one way of looking at this question is to analyse how many credits students gain per year and if that number increases over the years. It appears, then, that hbo students' efficiency has increased from 84% to 86% between 2004 and 2006; university students showed a slight increase from 80% to 81% in the same period (van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingeren et al., 2007, p. 70).

Another way of looking at efficiency is to see how many students attain their degree in a certain period of time. The most recent data available from the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) concern the 2005 enrolment cohort (see Fig. 1). This cohort entered almost completely into bachelor-master degree programmes. The figure shows that two out of every three students (67%) entering university bachelor programmes in 2005 did so on the basis of having obtained a secondary school diploma (*vwo*). One in five (21%) came from hbo institutions, while 6% showed a foreign degree and the last 5% were 'other' cases. By 2007, 78% of the 2005 students were on track for a university bachelor degree; they ought to obtain their bachelor degree by August 2008 to be on time but those data were not available at the time of writing. 1% already had earned their degree before this date. It can also be seen that most of the (self-)selection took place in the first year, because after one year, 7% had moved to hbo study programmes and another 7% had dropped out of Dutch higher education (and there were minor movements back into the university of 1% or less). However, almost as much drop-out took place after the second year (5%), and there

also was some further migration to hbo study programmes (2%). These figures match the Inspection's observation that 21% of students in universities had quit studying in universities after two years: as the figure below shows, 9% had gone to hbo programmes and 12% dropped out after two years. Similarly, the Inspection found that almost 23% of those starting in hbo institutions were no longer in that sector after two years (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007).

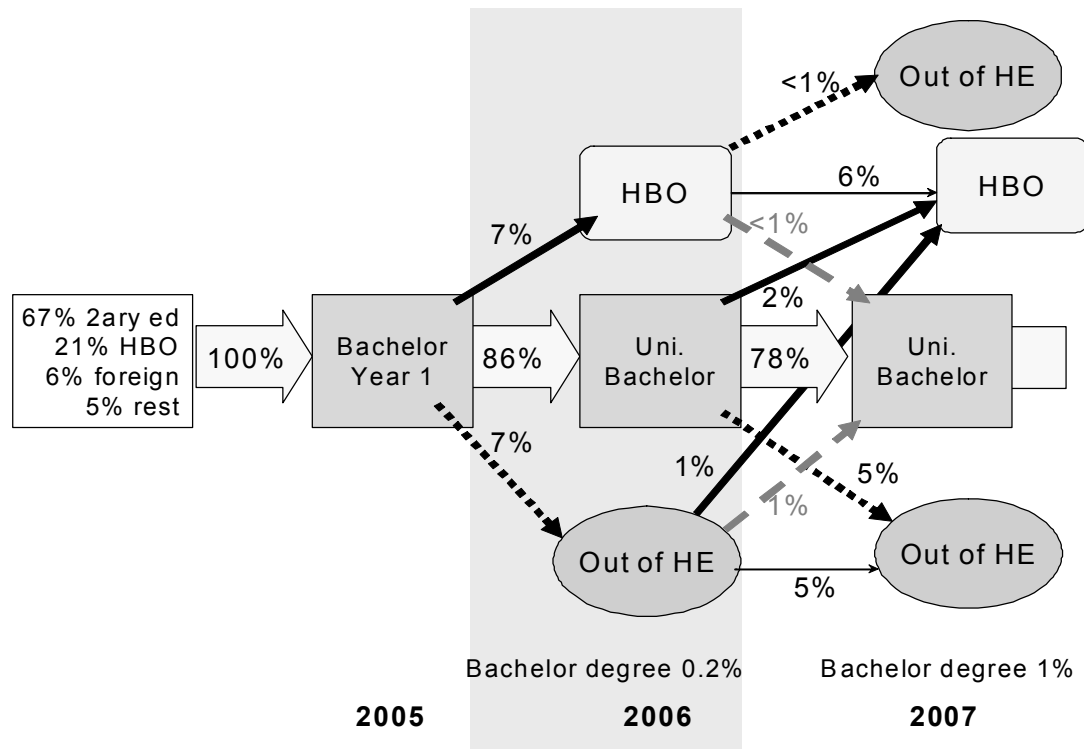


Fig. 1 Flowchart of university cohort 2005, situation 2007, by study status

Source: 1cHO 2007, VSNU/CBS (hoofdinschrijvingen, full time)

The overall figures cannot reveal how many students had switched study programmes within the university sector. The Inspection of Education found that only little over half the students were following the same study programme in the same institution two years after initial enrolment (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2008a, p. 15). It should be borne in mind, though, that one of the functions of the first year of study is precisely to guide students to better-matching study programmes; think also of the discussion about the 'binding study advice' ('*bindend studieadvies*' or '*BSA*'). This should be seen as a contribution to the effectiveness of the overall higher education system by leading more students to degrees with which they may work and participate in society rather than as a reduction of efficiency by causing delay in achieving degrees.

For an earlier cohort, those starting in 2002 when the bachelor programmes were partly introduced, the VSNU calculated that after five years (i.e. with up to two year's delay), 56% of those who had started university study programmes had earned a bachelor degree. This low percentage is partly due to students who started their master degrees before finishing their bachelor degree fully ('soft' entry into 'continuation master' programmes).

The total number of graduates has grown over the last 17 years (see Fig. 2); the rate of growth since ca. 1999 has been rising steadily, but on aggregate has not changed visibly due to the change-over to the bachelor–master degree system.

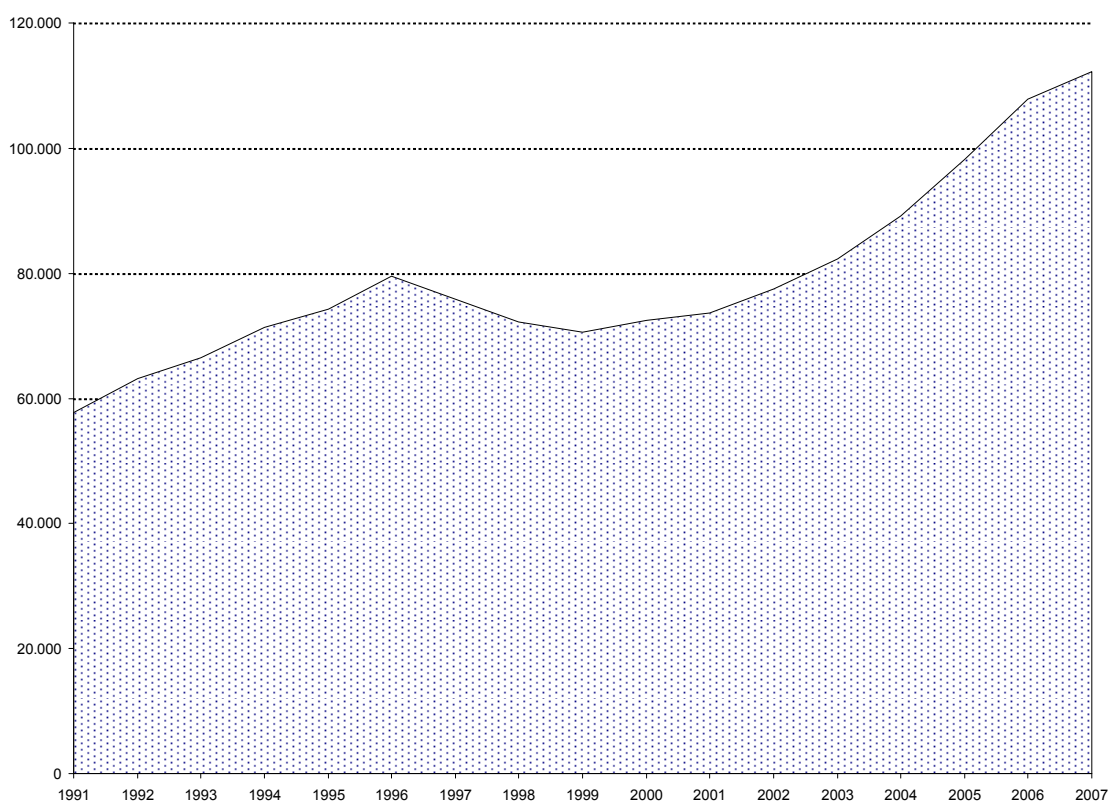


Fig. 2 Graduates per academic year ending in 1991...2007 (HE total; absolute numbers)

Source: CBS Statline, accessed 2008-06-09.¹²

Looking at the different types of degrees (see Fig. 3), it appears that the largest number of graduates are hbo bachelors and that their numbers in large part explain the rise of graduates between 1999 and 2004, but has remained constant since then. The rise in

¹² Figures exclude post-initial master degrees, e.g. in hbo institutions, and medical professional degrees, additional university teachers' degrees etc. Figures for 2006/2007 are temporary and subject to revision.

numbers of graduates in the most recent years must therefore be ascribed mainly to the university sector and is largely a consequence of most students obtaining two degrees instead of one: first a bachelor degree and then one or more years later their master degree. Due to the still incomplete phasing out of the old-style '*doctoraal*' degree (drs./mr./ir.), this figure has to be interpreted with much care and it cannot yet be judged if the policy target of more (master) graduates is being met. Every year, the number of bachelor degrees in universities is higher than the number of master degrees awarded, so that even counting with some years' delay, we may expect that some university bachelor graduates stop studying; around 5% of university bachelor graduates do not wish to continue immediately with a master programme in a Dutch university (van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, Klingeren et al., 2007). Part of the 5% enter the labour market, another part concerns students enrolling in higher education institutions abroad (interviews 05-08; 05-16a).¹³

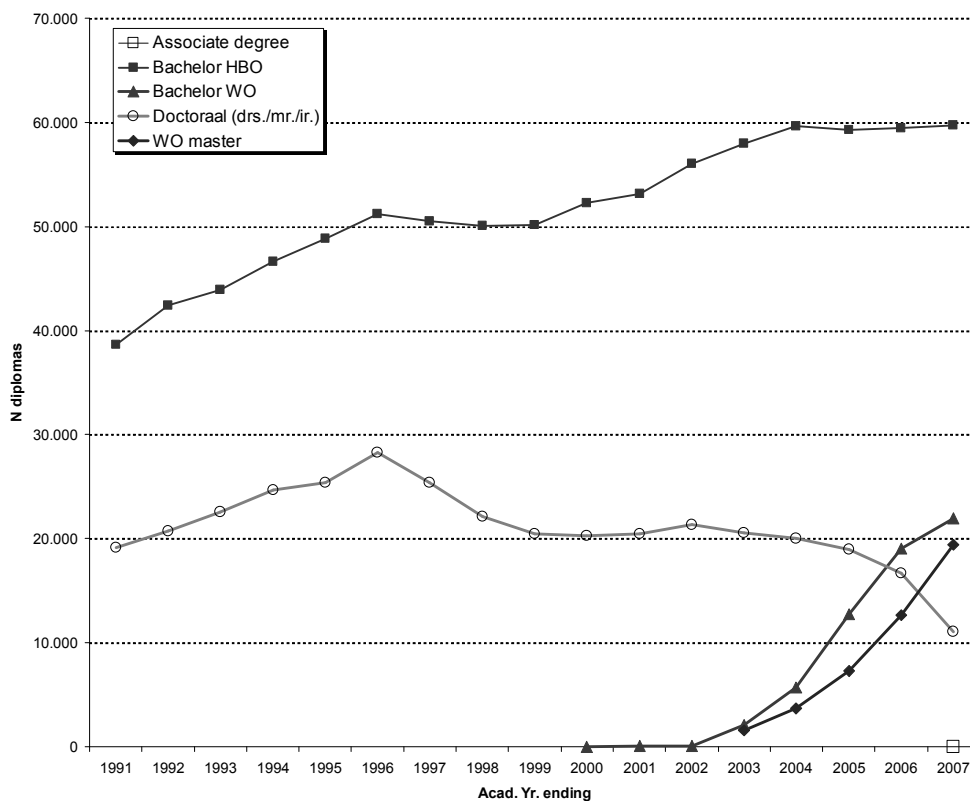


Fig. 3 Graduates in academic years ending 1991...2007, per degree type (absolute numbers)

Source: CBS Statline, accessed 2008-06-09.¹⁴

¹³ Interviews are designated by the date at which they were conducted, to safeguard anonymity of the interviewees.

¹⁴ Figures exclude post-initial master degrees, e.g. in hbo institutions, and medical professional degrees, additional university teachers' degrees etc. Figures for 2006/2007 are temporary and subject to revision.

2.3.2 Transition from university bachelors to master cycle

The first question in this section is whether every university bachelor graduate can enter at least one master programme without encountering a selection hurdle. The law required that there should be at least one master programme connected to each bachelor programme in universities to which those bachelor graduates can enrol without selection. According to the annual *Studentenmonitor* questionnaire of 2006, 87% of full-time bachelor students in universities planned to continue studying in the master phase; in fact, 86% of the university bachelors of 2005/2006 did stay in the same university for their master study. For 68% of master students in universities the fact that their programme was directly consecutive to the bachelor had been one of their motives in choosing the programme (van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingeren et al., 2007, pp. 59, 63). As stated in the previous section, such '*doorstroommasters*' have been established everywhere; hence, the legal requirement was realised. However, as some of our interviewees pointed out, this requirement degraded the bachelor–master system. Their principal objection was that a bachelor plus consecutive master programme would not be seen as separate programmes but in fact continued the pre-2003 situation. In this respect the '*hard cut*' ('*harde knip*'¹⁵) was mentioned as a solution to enforce the recognition of the bachelor and master cycles as separate study programmes.

The next question concerned the arrangements for enrolment of students from other university programmes and disciplines into university master programmes (i.e. non-consecutive masters). At first, higher education institutions did not have clear guidelines on admission criteria for their master programmes. This was mentioned as one of the reasons for the low proportion of bachelor degree holders in universities transferring to master programmes that were not immediately following on their bachelor programme (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, pp. 10-12). Because the universities' attention was focused on rapid development of bachelor programmes,

¹⁵ The '*hard cut*' means the condition that a student must have fulfilled *all* requirements for a bachelor degree before being allowed to start in a master programme. A major drawback of this rule is that students who have fulfilled all but one or a few requirements of their bachelor degree must wait for one year (or nowadays one semester, in programmes adapting to the '*hard cut*') before they can continue their educational career. This made the '*hard cut*' an unpopular option in universities (Schade, 2004). On the other hand, without it, students are less motivated to finish their bachelor degree (leading to lower efficiency indicators) and the pre-2003 situation persists of students who are ready to finish their master degree but still have some bachelor courses to be finished.

master programmes and admission criteria were developed later and in a piecemeal fashion (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, pp. 28, 66, 2004a, p. 15).

For university students there are basically three transition trajectories if they want to switch between universities to follow a master programme. First, the university students can be admitted directly into the master programme. This applies if the receiving master programme judges that the student's bachelor degree is related to the master or that it is comparable to the bachelor programme which the '*doorstroom*'-students followed). The second option is that the university students follow a pre-master programme *after* completing their bachelor (see § 2.4.1). Third, students may take several courses *during* their bachelor study at the receiving university, to make up for 'deficiencies'. In that way they avoid the pre-master track, so that they are directly admissible once they fulfilled the courses and completed their bachelor (in Dutch: '*bijvakkers*').¹⁶ Also in hbo institutions 'transition profiles' have been introduced during the bachelor phase (Witte, 2006, p. 251). Until 2005-2006, 58% of master students had not encountered a selection process; 35% had had to fulfil requirements regarding courses (or, less often, grades and motivation) and 6% had to succeed in a competitive selection process (van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingereren et al., 2007, pp. 65-66).

Looking at the quantitative level of mobility of students at the point of choosing a master programme, the introduction of the bachelor–master system did not have a major immediate impact. To a very large extent, university bachelor graduates in the first years of the new degree system opt for the continuation master programme ('*doorstroommaster*') offered by their university (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, pp. 10-11). From data in the *Studentenmonitor* 2006, we calculated that in 2005/2006 enrolment in master programmes consisted for 7% of students coming from other universities or other sectors of knowledge (van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingereren et al., 2007, p. 10). The VSNU's analysis of national statistics ('1cHO2007' data) showed that in 2005/2006 85% of university bachelor degree holders progressed to a master-degree programme in the same university (see Tab. 3). Further calculations led the VSNU to the conclusion that 79% of students entered a continuation master programme. However, Tab. 3 shows that the proportion of students remaining in the same university showed a tendency to go down, from 92%

¹⁶ Note that the Inspection of Education found that often there is room for increasing the workload in the bachelor phase (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2008b; also van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Wermink, Sijbers, Thomassen, van Klingereren et al., 2007b). If combined with higher demands on the bachelors' competences, this might make pre-master tracks much less often necessary.

in 2002/2003 (when the bachelor-master structure was beginning to be introduced) to 85% in 2005/2006.

The same table shows that in the 2005/2006 academic year 5% of the university bachelor degree holders went to a different Dutch university, and 10% chose another option, which might be to go abroad for a master degree or to enter the labour market. It is estimated that around 5% entered the labour market (see § 2.3.3), which leaves around 5% for international mobility and other options.

Tab. 3 Master programme destinations of university bachelor degree holders (absolute and %)

Academic year	In Dutch university master programme				Not in Dutch university master programme by 1-10-2007		Total	
	At the same university		In another university					
2002/2003	1841	92%	28	1%	125	6%	1994	100%
2003/2004	4877	87%	190	3%	508	9%	5575	100%
2004/2005	11039	86%	603	5%	1178	9%	12820	100%
2005/2006	16267	85%	986	5%	1929	10%	19182	100%
2006/2007	17340*	78%*	1074*	5%*	3709*	17%*	22123*	100%

* Figures up to 1-10-2007, subject to change.

Source: VSNU analysis of 1cHO2007 data.

A year later, in 2006/2007, according to the VSNU web site the inflow of university students from other universities in master studies was 11%.¹⁷ Although the bases for these calculations may be different so that the statistics are not directly comparable, the trend seems to be that students increasingly choose other master programmes than the continuation track; the flexibility of the bachelor–master system is becoming more of a reality.

Several factors may have kept the university–university mobility rather low at the beginning. First, the perceived lack of information is a factor. University students from the beginning felt well-informed about the entry qualifications and inflow moments of their 'doorstroom'-master. This information is directly supplied to them by their initial university. However information from other master programmes offered by other universities was rather scarce in the first years (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004a, p. 15). The information situation is beginning to improve (see website mentioned in footnote 10).

¹⁷ <http://www.vsnu.nl/web/show/id=96712/langid=43/framenoid=39657/langid=43/secure=false> (accessed 2008-05-12).

Second, mobility was kept low by the absence of a 'hard cut' (*'harde knip'*; see footnote 15 and associated text, above). Until now, most universities mostly admitted their 'own' bachelor students into the (continuation) master programmes even if they did not yet fully complete their bachelor or complied with the entry qualifications (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004a, p. 21). Considering the alternative of going to another higher education institution demanding full compliance with bachelor requirements from 'other' degree holders, and the resulting study delay, it is understandable that university students preferred continuing in the same setting. Some interviewed stakeholders argued that the next step should be a formal separation (*'harde knip'*) between the bachelor and master cycles. The position of pre-master programmes becomes even more crucial in case of a hard cut between bachelor and master programmes. Questions that then will have to be addressed include whether the 'hard cut' applies before or after the pre-master programme; how many moments of entry per year are offered (year-system or semester-system) in order to minimise delay for students, etc.

Whether, how and in what numbers hbo bachelors enter university master programmes will be covered in section 2.4.1.

2.3.3 *Transition to the labour market*

The bachelor–master degree reform was meant to increase the employability of graduates. The Bologna Declaration explicitly mentioned the need for bachelor programmes to be relevant to the labour market.

The hbo bachelor degree is closely linked to the labour market. The university bachelor degree, however, neither has close links with the labour market, nor is it seen as a full academic degree by Dutch stakeholders including most of our interviewees, among them were the representatives of employers (with few exceptions). Reasons for this attitude might include: employers are unfamiliar with the university bachelor, the graduates are relatively young, and/or employers are employing candidates who –in the future- can hold managerial positions, for which the knowledge and depth of a master degree are needed (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, pp. 27, also interview 05-19). From a university perspective there also seems to be little interest in making the university bachelor a qualification for the labour market (interview 05-16a). In 2005 more than half the university bachelor programmes did not have a clear labour market qualification (NVAO, 2007, pp. 21, 22). At the time, most university programmes had not yet consulted representatives of the potential labour market to discuss the desired

competences and knowledge levels (*'eindtermen'*) for the bachelor (and master) degrees (ibid.). However, in focusing on the labour market universities are bound by the distinction of the binary system and thus have to make sure the university bachelor (and master) will not enter the territory of hbo bachelors. Furthermore, also students did not regard the university bachelor degree as a qualification for the labour market, but rather as an occasion to choose their master programme (NVAO, 2007, p. 21).

Most of the Dutch stakeholders interviewed in our study found the new degree system clear and comprehensible from a labour market perspective, with the exception of the university bachelor. Representatives of employers confirmed this view in our interviews. Making the university bachelor fully labour-market relevant requires a reassessment by higher education and industry of their own assumptions concerning this degree. Some NESO¹⁸ officers reported having difficulties explaining to foreign employers (and students) the distinction between hbo masters and master degrees from universities.

The concern about employability of first-cycle graduates is wide-spread among universities in countries that used to have single-cycle, long study programmes (Reichert & Tauch, 2005). This may be characteristic of the early stage of reform, however to progress to better acceptance of bachelor-degree holders on the labour market, not only changes in the higher education institutions are needed but also on the labour market. The *Trends IV* report in this respect stressed the role of professional bodies (Reichert & Tauch, 2005).

Actual employment statistics for the new university bachelor and master degrees are only beginning to appear (see Tab. 4, below). The data on the 2005-2006 cohort of graduates show that the differences between holders of 'old-style' degrees and those of bachelors and masters in the university sector differ little: around 96% to 97% of university graduates find employment once they enter the labour market. The decimals should not be given too much importance as the sample size, especially for bachelor degree holders entering the labour market, is rather small.¹⁹ Considering that the bachelor degree is not seen as a final degree by most stakeholders, it is not surprising that there are not many bachelors entering the labour market. The fact that they find

¹⁸ NESO are the Netherlands Education Support Offices, organised by Nuffic, meant to promote the attractiveness of Dutch higher education abroad. NESO offices are located in China, Indonesia, Mexico, Taiwan and Vietnam.

¹⁹ The statistics presented in the table do not include the universities of Amsterdam (UvA), Maastricht and Utrecht. This means that the two largest universities are missing. Sample size also precluded from breaking the data down to knowledge areas.

employment in practically the same rate as other university degree holders is more of a surprise in that view. Possibly, the current labour market situation with shortages rather than unemployment helps make the situation this positive. Besides, maybe the bachelors entering the labour market have more adventurous personalities than average, giving them better job chances than average. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be much scepticism on the labour market as to the employability of the university bachelors.

Tab. 4 Employment rate, university graduation cohort 2005-2006

	Employed or self-employed (absolute)	(%)
'Old style' university degrees	10.950	96.5
University bachelor degree	1.966	96.0
University master degree	8.117	97.0
Total	21.033	96.6

Source: ROA

2.4 Emerging issues in the bachelor–master implementation

2.4.1 *Transition from hbo bachelors to university masters programmes*

When preparing the bachelor–master system it was assumed that the new system would facilitate a smooth transition for hbo graduates who to a master degree in a university. In this section this goal will be evaluated.

2.4.1.1 Situation before and after the introduction of the bachelor–master degrees

Already before the introduction of the bachelor–master system, hbo graduates could continue their study career at a university. Universities had to offer these students a programme which would allow them to graduate with an academic degree within a maximum of three years (Vossensteyn & Goedegebuure, 1992).

Due to the introduction of the bachelor–master transition more (centralised) attention was given to this particular group. The new system should in theory make the transition easier with less hindrances and delays. Within the bachelor–master system a bachelor degree gives access to a master degree. However this principal of the Anglo-Saxon system is somewhat difficult in the Dutch Higher Education due to its binary system.

To allow hbo bachelor graduates to continue their study career in a university master it was understood that these students would have to follow mandatory courses

(‘pre-master’ programmes) before they could be enrolled in the master programme. These programmes aim to bridge the gap between the knowledge and competences of hbo graduates²⁰ and university master programme requirements. Therefore, the programmes consist largely of elements not covered in the hbo bachelor curriculum, e.g. research methodology, statistics and academic skills (Hogeterp & Kolster, 2005). Most pre-master programmes for hbo students consist of 30 to 60 EC (half a year to a full year).²¹ Depending on the length of the master programme (one year being the minimum) a hbo student can often attain a university master degree in 1.5 to 2.5 years. This is an improvement compared to the pre-2003 situation.

About five years after the introduction of the bachelor–master system all Dutch universities have pre-master programmes in place. Admission to these programmes is in principle open to every hbo bachelor. Nonetheless, universities can and do select students on the basis of their previous education and after mandatory assessments (taken before enrolment). These assessment mostly cover the knowledge of English and/or mathematical proficiency (Kolster, 2007).

2.4.1.2 Cooperation between universities and hbo institutions

Regarding ‘pre-master’ programmes special attention must be given to the increasing cooperation between universities and hbo institutions. Nowadays every Dutch university has some sort of cooperation with one or more hbo institutions. Although some universities and hbo institutions started exploring the opportunities for cooperation before the introduction the bachelor–master system, it was certainly a trigger for a more elaborated form of cooperation (Van Zoggel, 2005). Some universities and hbo institutions formalised their cooperation by merging their governance boards.²² Without going into much detail on the forms and extent of the (institutional) arrangements, the cooperation holds advantages for hbo students, such as that hbo bachelor students (in some cases a select group) often are given the opportunity to follow pre-master courses *during* their bachelor curriculum,²³ thus gaining half a year. After successful completion of the pre-master and bachelor programme these students are directly admissible in the academic master.

²⁰ And other students with different competences, i.e. from other bachelor programmes, but here we focus on the hbo bachelor holders.

²¹ An issue is if pre-master programmes are part of normal higher education, and with that, if students have a right to the normal grants/loans. This issue, however, is not part of our evaluation.

²² Those of UvA-HvA, and VU-Windesheim.

²³ Just like the ‘normal’ pre-master programmes, these courses mostly amount to 30 EC.

2.4.1.3 Progress on the hbo bachelor to university master goal

The introduction of the bachelor–master system and the developments of ‘pre-master’ programmes as separate programmes and programmes embedded in some hbo curricula, appear to have made the transition easier in terms of required minimal time, hindrances and barriers. Still, hbo students encounter problems in the transition, mainly due to (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c):

- (1) the diversity of admission criteria and
- (2) the lack of governmental involvement in the pre-master programmes.

Both points have led to a non-uniform policy regarding tuition fees and students’ grants/loans, as well as regarding funding, quality assurance and recognition of the pre-master programmes. Furthermore, the Inspection of Education underlined three problems (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2007):

- (1) the cultural differences between hbo and university sectors,
- (2) the lack of involvement of the institutional leadership, and
- (3) the lack of facilities.

On the positive side, the Inspection’s report concluded that the admission criteria had been improved since 2005 and were sufficiently clear.

Considering that there are apparently fewer barriers than before, one might expect growth in hbo graduates’ enrolling in university master programmes. However, the introduction of the bachelor–master system did *not* include a goal to increase the number of transitions from hbo institutions to universities (Ministerie van OCW, 2003). In statistics on hbo bachelor graduates continuing their study career at a university,²⁴ there is not a clear trend over the last fifteen years (see Fig. 4). From 1993 to 1996 there was a rapid decrease from 16% to 8%, then between 1995 and 2004 the hbo inflow doubled in absolute numbers (from around 3000 to over 6000). In percentages the growth was somewhat less marked; from 8% in 1995 to almost 14% (around 8000 persons) in 2003 and 2004. Since then, figures have stabilised at around 7500, or almost 13% of all hbo bachelors. It is early to make definitive statements about trends, but since the introduction of the bachelor–master reform absolute mobility between hbo

²⁴ The numbers concern the total percentage of hbo bachelor graduates of academic year t enrolled in university programmes in academic year $t+1$, regardless whether the programme is a bachelor or a master. See also Kolster (2007).

and universities did not increase.²⁵ In the academic year 2005/2006, this number of hbo bachelors would make up over a quarter (27%) of all newly-enrolling master students in universities; in 2006/2007 it would be 19% due to the quick growth of numbers of master students.²⁶ As the figure shows, not all hbo bachelor degree holders enter master programmes (directly), so that these percentages cannot be taken at face value. Yet this indicates that hbo bachelors make up a considerable part of the master students in Dutch universities.

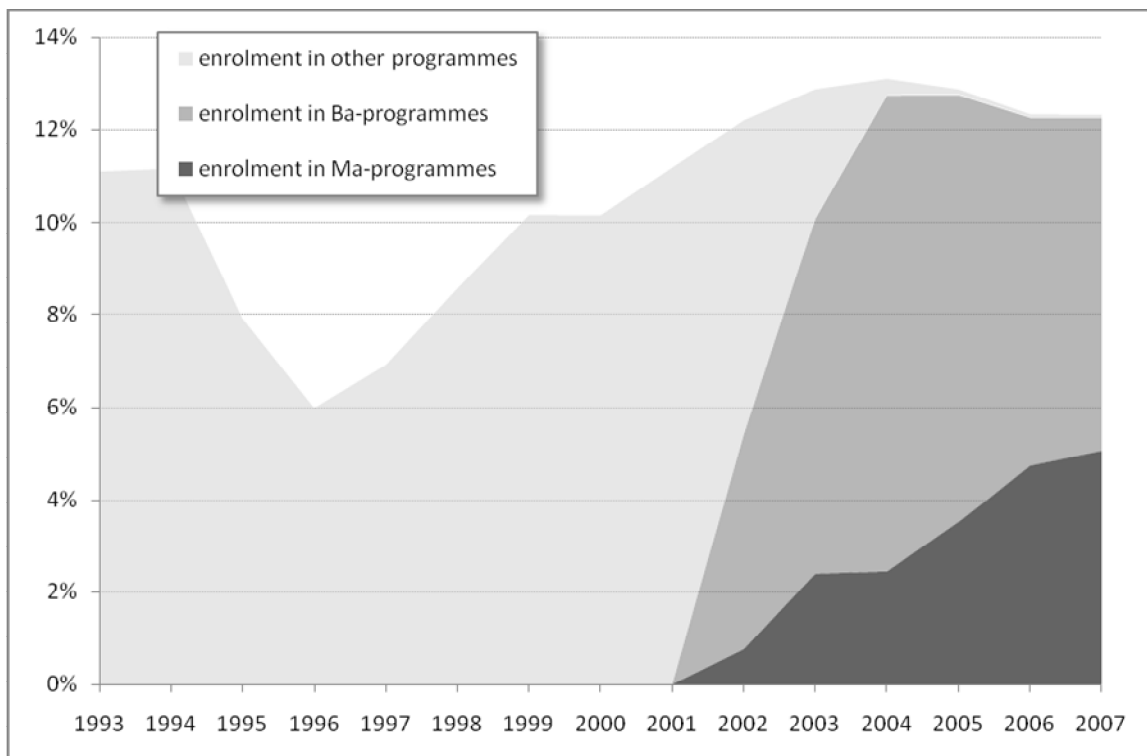


Fig. 4 Hbo bachelor graduates enrolling in university study programmes (in % of hbo bachelors)

Source: Ministry OCW, based on 1cHO statistics

Looking at the figure in more detail, the reform towards the bachelor–master degrees has been made quickly for this group of students: starting from zero in 2001, in 2004 practically all transitions from hbo-bachelors to university study programmes were to

²⁵ VSNU's calculation on 1cHO 2007 statistics indicate around 7500 students entering master degree programmes in 2006 with an hbo history. This figure rose steadily over recent years and does not include hbo inflow into bachelor and pre-master programmes.

²⁶ Calculating from another base, the VSNU found that former hbo students made up 29% and 24% of master enrolments in these years, respectively (www.vsnu.nl/web/show/id=96658/langid=43/framenoid=41685/langid=43/secure=false, accessed 2008-07-21)

the bachelor and master programmes. It may seem remarkable that the large majority of hbo-bachelors enter universities at the bachelor level rather than at the master level, because they already hold a bachelor degree. Most likely, this is because pre-master programmes are counted as part of the bachelor cycle.

In summary, the transition from hbo to university is serving a sizable minority of students, but an hbo bachelor degree is still seen primarily as a qualification to enter the labour market (Ministerie van OCW, 2005).

2.4.2 *Diversity of master programmes*

The diversity of types of names of master programmes has increased with the bachelor–master degree reform. The Cohen Committee in 2001 had proposed a classification into research programmes, study programmes for teacher training and programmes preparing students for different functions in society; the former two categories should be two-year programmes. A year later, the Reneman Committee distinguished research programmes, professional ones and ‘domain’ (general) masters; the committee also zoomed in on criteria for research masters (Witte, 2006, pp. 236, 244). Now, in 2008, the usual distinctions are between continuation masters (*‘doorstroommasters’*), top or prestige masters and research masters; the professional masters in the traditional professional areas in the universities mostly remain aloof of the debate (medicine c.a., accountancy, etc.). The rationale behind allotting study programmes to the different categories was not always clear (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c). Another issue in this respect, also emerging in some of our interviews, was an overall vision with regard to the desired numbers and types of master programmes that seems to be lacking in the Netherlands.

As mentioned before, at least one ‘continuation master’ programme had to be provided by the universities in connection with every bachelor study, to maintain the idea that a ‘complete’ university education must be completed at the master level. Accordingly, ‘standard’ master programmes can be found everywhere. They have a size of 60 EC or in specific disciplines 120 EC. Entry is guaranteed to bachelor degree holders from the ‘own’ programme; candidates with bachelor degrees from other programmes must fulfil conditions with regard to knowledge, skills and competences equivalent to the ‘own’ bachelors to gain entry. As the Inspection of Education reported (2005c), most former graduation topics were converted to tracks or specialisations within the new-style master programmes. These graduation topics are not subject to separate accreditation and institutions can subsume as many as they like

under a single master degree. On the other hand, accrediting all study specialisations separately even if they have more than 70% of their courses in common (which is the NVAO's criterion to consider study programmes as basically the same) would clutter the accreditation system.

Universities consider 'top' and 'prestige' master programmes important in their profiling. The idea of top programmes entered the policy agenda with the Rinnooy Kan Committee and the Minister's reaction to it (Commissie-Rinnooy Kan, 2000; Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2000). They were to be highly demanding and should be able to attract talented students internationally (Witte, 2006, p. 250).

Moreover, since the introduction of the bachelor–master structure research master programmes quickly gained popularity. By the end of 2006, 113 research master programmes had been accredited (NVAO, 2007, p. 7), mostly in the humanities and social sciences (see Tab. 5). 'Top masters' are not accredited separately, and are for that reason not easily recognisable. Universities may use the adjective to distinguish master programmes that aim to attract the very best students (internationally) and that tend to prepare for a further research career, just like research master programmes. Top master programmes tend to occur in the sciences. The reason for the popularity of 'top' masters rather than research masters may be that in these areas all master programmes were already 120 EC programmes, so that they stood little to gain from official recognition as research master programmes. In the humanities and social sciences, by contrast, the recognition as a 120 EC programme instead of 60 EC does make a large difference.

Tab. 5 Accredited Research Master programmes by disciplinary area

	Humanities	Social Sciences	Biomedical and Geo Sciences	Total
Number	52	49	12	113
%	46	43	11	100

Source: (NVAO, 2007)

Research master programmes admitted mostly between 10 and 60 students per year each; the relatively low intake of students gave rise to some concern among universities and stakeholders. To tackle the problem of low student numbers in research master programmes, these programmes should be given a more distinctive profile and awareness of them among the student population should be increased, explaining moreover that these programmes are research-oriented, but do not irrevocably mean definitive career decisions (Ministerie OCW, 2007). Moreover, it

should be stressed that research careers in the knowledge society are not limited to universities, but also include research, design and innovation jobs in the rest of the economy.

The quality of research master programmes is valued highly by the accreditation committees in which the accreditation organisation NVAO cooperates with the Royal Academy of Sciences KNAW. However, the level of diversity, the lack of an unambiguous degree (although there are advantages and disadvantages to using the M.Phil. title;²⁷ interview 05-08), the local nature and high costs of these programmes remain reasons of concern (ibid.).

Many interviewees were of the opinion that 'top' masters labels ought to be abolished, because all masters are 'top' and the presence too many categories of master programmes confuse the Dutch higher education 'market'. The research master, however, was universally seen as a good complement to the 'normal' masters. How the diversity of master programme offerings was viewed abroad, was not part of our interviews with international experts.

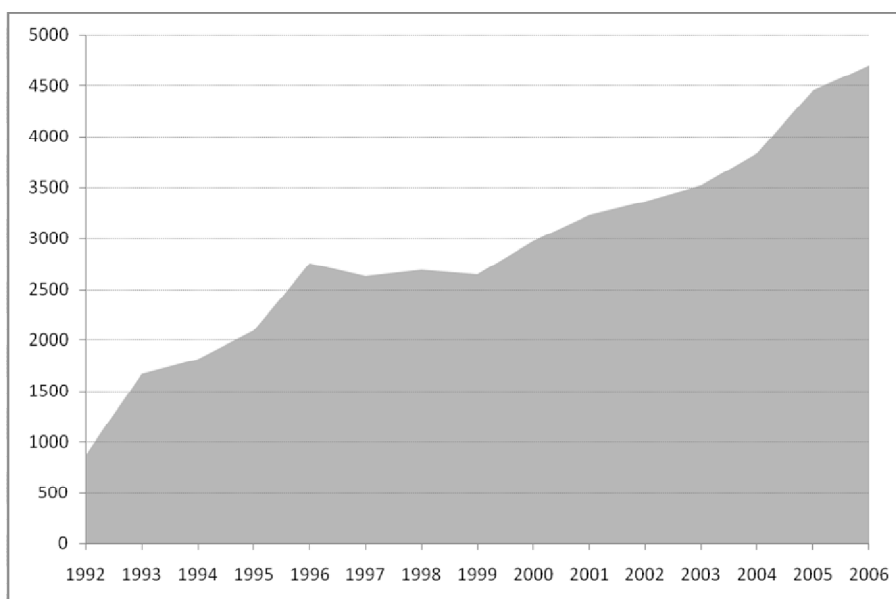


Fig. 5 Number of hbo Master degrees per year

Source: Ministry OCW, based on 1CijferHO statistics

In general, Dutch universities market themselves by emphasising their curricula, the presence of a major-minor system, and the possibilities offered to study abroad and/or do internships during one's studies. There is a call for more graduates in science and

²⁷ The main advantage of the M.Phil. is that it is a distinctive title; the main disadvantage that in some (US) higher education systems it is seen as a 'consolation prize' for who dropped out of the Ph.D.

engineering and, concerning language and literature studies, there are efforts to increase the offer of these programmes in English to strengthen the international position of Dutch programmes (HOOP, 2004)(NVAO, 2007, p. 39).

The development of further master programmes in hbo institutions was considered an important policy goal (Staatssecretaris Hoger onderwijs, 2003). Master programmes already existed in the hbo sector (e.g. in teacher training, arts, architecture) and have been extended since the introduction of the bachelor–master system, especially in the area of health (advanced nursing practice, physician assistant). Some of the hbo master programmes in the health sector receive public funding (Witte, 2006, pp. 235-236). Nevertheless, the hbo institutions' Executive Boards (*Colleges van Bestuur*) consider establishing new master programmes a frustrating task (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, p. 37). Their main frustrations lie in the slow political decision-making process, unfair competition from universities on funding,²⁸ and issues related to the titles of degrees in the Dutch binary system. Yet, according to an expert meeting (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2006c, p. 7), hbo master programmes have considerable added value in comparison with the old situation, particularly because of their explicitly professional orientation. If this added value becomes apparent in the world of work, then the funding problem might be resolved, according to this meeting's report. Moreover, the Minister recently approved a budget to fund these new master programmes, with € 5 million available in 2008, growing to € 20 million by 2011. The number of hbo master degrees had been growing fairly steadily since 1992 (see Fig. 5, above). After the introduction of the bachelor–master degrees, the growth seems to have sped up, although it is too early to state so confidently.

2.4.3 *The developments towards a third cycle and professional doctorates*

Originally, the Bologna Declaration only mentioned two cycles, which became bachelor and master in the Netherlands. In a ministers' follow-up meeting, in Berlin in 2003, the third cycle was added to the Bologna process (see chapter 4).

Compared with many participating, the Netherlands had already started formalising the trajectory from master degree to doctor degree early on. Research schools (*onderzoekscholen*) had been organised in the Netherlands since the early 1990s (Bartelse, 1999). The relationship between graduate study programmes (master programmes) and the following trajectory may change because of the introduction of

²⁸ Because the law classifies master programmes in universities as part of the initial, funded, phase rather than the advanced, non-funded, phase as in the hbo sector.

the research master programmes, especially in the social sciences and humanities, where the research master programmes are longer than the normal ones (120 instead of 60 EC). The expectation of reaching the Ph.D. degree in three instead of four years is the most prominent potential change (NVAO, 2007, p. 39).

Another recent change with regard to the third cycle is the increased interest in developing 'professional doctorates', alongside the traditionally research-oriented Ph.D. degree (dr.). Plans for professional doctorates have been under development among Dutch universities at least since 2005, building on earlier experiences with for instance postgraduate designers' programmes ('ontwerpersopleidingen'), as in the Technical University of Eindhoven (www.3tu.nl/en/education/sai). Professional doctorates are shorter (two-year) study programmes oriented to professional practice, with a high-level thesis focusing on research in practical situations. It leads to degrees like (in Anglo-Saxon countries) DBA, Ed.D., MD, D.Eng., etc. In the Netherlands a PD.+field title is used, e.g. PDEng. (Huisman & van der Wende, 2005).

Besides serving other professionals, professional doctorates might play a role in upgrading of staff in hbo institutions, which in turn might add to the professionalization of the education for undergraduate students in those institutions. The Ministry OCW and the hbo sector agreed to stimulate upgrading of staff members, expecting professional doctorates to play an important role (Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2005b). Some universities are active in this area in a structured way (e.g. University of Utrecht).

More recent developments with regard to professional doctorates were not found.

2.4.4 *The development of short higher education programmes (associate degrees)*

Another new type of degrees are the Associate Degrees (Ad), a new version of 'short hbo' education, with a two-year (full-time) curriculum. Associate degrees are meant to play a role in life-long learning, by giving opportunities to vocationally-trained persons already on the labour market ('mbo-4' level). Shorter degrees than the bachelor are not explicitly covered by the Bologna Declaration, but of course not forbidden by it either, and exist in other countries as well (e.g. certificates and diploma's in the UK and Ireland). Experiments with associate degree programmes have begun in 2006-2007 (Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2005a). The first ten associate degree diplomas were awarded in 2006-2007 (see also Fig. 3). The associate degrees will be evaluated separately.

3 Accreditation

3.1 Introduction of accreditation in national perspective

3.1.1 *Policy initiatives*

Accreditation of all study programmes leading to a bachelor or master degree was introduced simultaneously with the new degree system itself. The WHW was changed to include an independent national accreditation organisation instead of the brief reference to a collective external quality assurance scheme. Accreditation was meant to come 'on top' of the old external quality assurance scheme and as such did not replace it. It should lead to more concise and easily understandable statements on the quality of study programmes through the 'approval stamp' of accreditation, but not take away from the improvement function of peer review—although some commentators doubted this would be possible (Goedegebuure, Jeliaskova, Pothof, & Weusthof, 2002; Westerheijden, 1997, 2003).

One of the elements of the previous quality assurance schemes in Dutch higher education that met with ever decreasing support was that they were being coordinated by the umbrella organisations of the higher education institutions themselves, the VSNU and the HBO Raad. At first, in the mid-1980s (Ministerie van Onderwijs & Wetenschappen, 1985), the umbrella organisations' involvement had been a way to gain support from the higher education institutions for quality assurance. Besides, the organisational distance from the government was intended to strengthen the potential for quality improvement. The necessary accountability and the rigorousness of the quality assurance scheme were assured by the Inspection for Education (Jeliaskova & Westerheijden, 2004; Scheele, Maassen, & Westerheijden, 1998). This arrangement was considered a success and served as a model for other countries' quality assurance schemes, e.g. in Denmark and Portugal. Through the EU's pilot project in quality assurance and the activity of the VSNU the word was spread much wider (Amaral, 1994; Kern, 1998; Thune, 1994; Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

After about a decade of experience with this quality assurance scheme, it was becoming a routine and the political and social support for it seemed to fade, as mentioned above. In a way, the actors all got used to the processes and procedures and

knew 'how to play the game'. In the new arrangement of the 2002 change of law, the major change was the introduction of accreditation 'on top of' the quality assurance system. Put succinctly: the external evaluation reports were too thick and too vague for 'end users' in society (students, parents, employers) to be useful and the simple 'yes/no' accreditation statement would radically change that. In the institutional arrangement of accreditation, emphasis was put on:

- credibility for accreditation by putting an independent organisation in charge;
- transparency through clearly reasoned judgements on the quality of study programmes;
- clarity about administrative consequences in case of too low quality.

These points implied: first, establishing what became the NVAO as a '*zelfstandig bestuursorgaan (ZBO)*', an independent governmental agency for accreditation, which was—second—working on the basis of a well-formulated framework and, third, explicit formulation of consequences of non-accredited status for study programmes.

These consequences were:

- no recognition of the degree (cancellation from the CROHO);
- no grant/loan support for students enrolled in the programme;
- no public funding for the programme (only applicable to funded higher education institutions).

Two other elements of the institutional arrangement were characteristic for the new Dutch quality assurance scheme:

- a diverse quality assurance system because several organisations can perform external evaluations (the Dutch *vbi's*: '*visiterende en beoordelende instellingen*');
- assurance of quality of non-funded higher education ('*aangewezen onderwijs*').

The diversity of quality assessment agencies ('*visiterende en beoordelende instellingen (vbi's)*') on the one hand ensured that the experience of VSNU and hbo Raad could be kept in the system, although their evaluation departments had to be made into independent organisations. On the other hand it opened the market on as equal a basis as possible for private companies to become *vbi's*. This was connected to an

arrangement nowhere found, namely with separate organisations doing the evaluation (vbi's) and assessing them for accreditation (NVAO's task; see Fig. 6).²⁹

Opening the market with a 'level playing field' was also a major drive behind the other element, i.e. including non-funded higher education (*'aangewezen onderwijs'*) in the accreditation scheme.

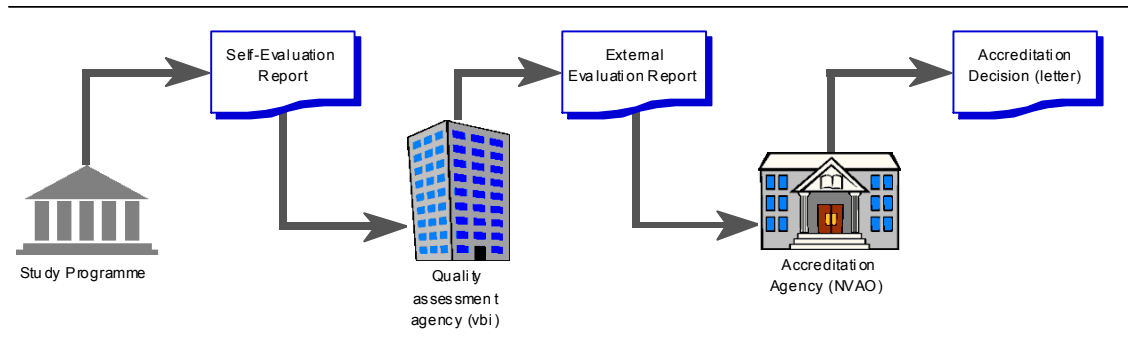


Fig. 6 Accreditation scheme

3.1.2 Implementation of the accreditation scheme

The establishment of an independent accreditation agency had been prepared by a 'trailblazer committee' (Commissie Accreditatie Hoger Onderwijs, 2001) and the Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO) was established quickly after the law had been adopted with strong representatives of the academic community in its board to achieve credibility and acceptance by the higher education institutions. Internationalisation developments quickly overtook the new-born organisation and on 3 September 2003 an international treaty was signed, merging the Dutch accreditation organisation into the NVAO, the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 22; "Verdrag tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Vlaamse Gemeenschap van België inzake de accreditatie van opleidingen binnen het Nederlandse en Vlaamse hoger onderwijs," 2003).³⁰ The NVAO resides in The Hague, with Dutch and Flemish staff members as well as Dutch and Flemish governors. The

²⁹ It is well-established good practice in accreditation schemes to separate strictly the team making the external evaluation and the board making the accreditation decision. However, making the separation as strict as locating them in different organisations was a model only found in Germany, which had established an accreditation scheme since 1999 (Schade, 2004).

³⁰ Although the NVAO is a bi-national organisation, our report only concerns its operation in the Netherlands.

committee of the two ministers responsible for higher education is the ultimate administrative authority for the NVAO, but operationally it is autonomous (<http://www.nvao.net>).

To avoid the NVAO immediately being flooded with accreditation requests, all programmes were awarded *de jure* accreditation for (as a rule) six years after their previous external review, until at the latest 2009. Already in 2003, the first Dutch study programmes were accredited. Until April 2008, the NVAO made 1765 accreditation decisions (see Tab. 6). The vast majority were positive decisions (accentuated by coloured lines in the table): 1751 (99.2%) study programmes were accredited. Almost half (49%) the accredited programmes were bachelor programmes, and the other half (51%) master programmes (see fig. 7).³¹ As mentioned above, the majority (61%) of accredited programmes are found in universities, with on average two master programmes (715) for each bachelor programme (347). With that number of decisions made, the NVAO is on schedule for completing the first round by the end of 2009, as planned (interview 04-29).

Tab. 6 Accreditation decisions by NVAO (until 18-4-2008)

Subsector of higher education	Decision	Number
Hbo – Bachelor	Negative	2
	VBI-report rejected	5
	Probation	5
	Accredited	512
University – Bachelor	Accredited	347
University – Master	Accredited	715
Hbo – Master	Accredited	177
	Negative (new programme)	2
Total		1765

Source: www.nvao.net, accessed 2008-04-18.

³¹ The statistics do not distinguish between ‘initial’ and ‘post-initial’ master programmes.

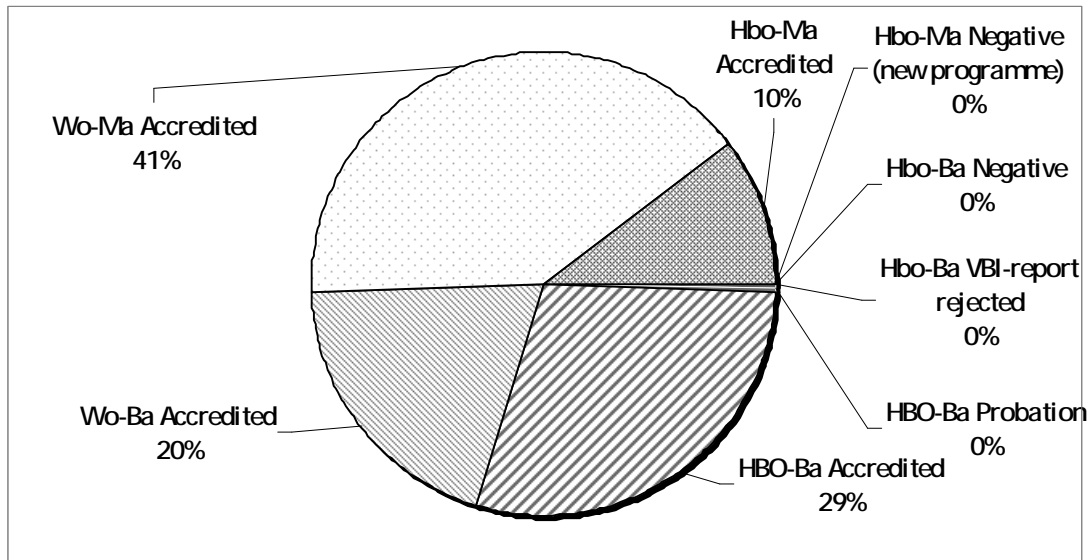


Fig. 7 Division of positive accreditations across levels and subsectors

Source: www.nvao.net, accessed 2008-04-18.

Interestingly, not a single negative decision was made about university programmes (university bachelor and university master). There may be several reasons, e.g. that university programmes are better at fulfilling the accreditation criteria than those in hbo institutions, or that the *vbi's* active for university programmes give more positive external evaluation reports, or that the universities avoid asking accreditation for programmes that they expect to come out weak. It may not be possible to know which of these options is the most likely, because the NVAO does not publish such information. However, the NVAO mentions that 156 cases were stopped before an accreditation decision was made, in practically all (153) cases because the higher education institutions withdrew their requests (see Tab. 7). Moreover, the NVAO mentions that some of the withdrawn requests concerned research master programmes (which do not occur in the hbo sector). So we know that not all initiatives from universities were successful, which implies that self-regulation under the threat of possible negative accreditation was effective in universities. In other words: 'There is added value [in NVAO's accreditation], but that materialises *before* the actual accreditation process and not as a visible result of negative decisions' (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 21). The international review committee noted that the test of new study programmes (*toets nieuwe opleiding*) had a similar improvement effect.

Tab. 7 Stopped accreditation cases, by year

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Withdrawn	2	37	39	48	27	153
Dismissed				3		3
Total	2	37	39	51	27	156

Source: <http://nvaio.net/beoordeelde-opleidingen>, accessed 2008-04-26

Finally, the NVAO estimates that higher education institutions and quality assessment agencies (vbi's) together have stopped a number of study programme developments and accreditation processes before they could reach the NVAO. This self-regulation of the higher education system to withdraw low-quality plans may have affected hundreds of initiatives, although actual numbers are not known. An indication will be available at the end of the first round of accreditation in 2009: all 'sleeping' programmes, many of them in privately funded higher education institutions,³² are then expected to be weeded out of the CROHO (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007).

3.2 Impact of accreditation in a national perspective

3.2.1 Efficient and effective accreditation system

Does the Netherlands have an efficient and effective accreditation system? Some figures with regard to effectiveness have been given above: the system adequately performs its task to evaluate a large number of study programmes (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2006a).

The accreditation system was introduced after thorough preparation, yet quickly in international comparison. Procedures and regulations were incrementally adapted in the first years of operation, learning from experiences. This ensured increasing effectiveness, but also led to some dissatisfaction out of uncertainty among the vbi's and higher education institutions. After the Inspection's mid-term review and in association with the international review of the NVAO, some larger adaptations were made (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007):

³² There were around 3,000 licences for study programmes in private higher education institutions at the outset of the accreditation system (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007).

- Study programmes were given a period of one year to improve weaknesses, during which their accreditation status was pending but not withdrawn as before ('statutory repair period', more or less like a 'probation' period); the original arrangement was deemed too strict;
- The division of tasks between NVAO and vbi's was clarified; for instance, decision rules were formulated more extensively by the NVAO;
- The order of initial accreditation and macro-efficiency check was reversed: first a test of macro-efficiency (indicating the chance that public funding would become available), and then the detailed accreditation of the study programme plans;
- 'Special marks' were introduced (NVAO, 2006). These were meant to enable recognition of higher education institutions' specific profiles and proven extra quality, and thus to stimulate development of specific profiles.

The outcomes of the accreditation system give trustworthy information to users about the quality of higher education: 'The output of the system is and can be trusted by students, employers and the general public' (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 21).

Is it also effective in improving quality? Low-quality programmes are not permitted to operate, and higher education institutions to a very large extent ensure that the accreditation requests are of a sufficient quality not to fail before they reach the NVAO. In that sense, the accreditation system protects Dutch society against low-quality higher education; the basic quality is assured. This effect is similar to the assurance of basic quality under the old quality assessment system (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2000). But the new accreditation system did put higher requirements on the internal quality management of the higher education institutions, which is seen as a benefit for quality (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 21).

Under the old system, it proved difficult to stimulate study programmes to engage in continuous quality improvement *above* the level needed for positive evaluation outcomes (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2000). A similar situation prevails again: 'There is a very strong orientation on processes and procedures (which are rather formalistic and legalistic) and there is too little attention paid to content and to quality improvement above the threshold level' (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, pp. 22,

23). This can be regarded as a result of the decision to make accreditation a yes/no decision instead of a gradual grading system.³³

To overcome the effect of no improvement above the threshold of basic quality, the current accreditation system has introduced awarding special marks (see above) as a way to introduce such stimuli. Between late 2006 and May 2008, three 'special quality' marks were awarded, and seven 'special characteristics' marks to Dutch higher education programmes. 'Special characteristics' included for example attention to sustainability in chemistry studies, and aspects of integrating practice into education. 'Special quality' was awarded to programmes with a high level of students' performances (in two university bachelor programmes; one also recognised for its efficiency), or with high quality staff (one hbo bachelor programme) (See: www.nvaio.net; accessed 2008-05-02). The fact that 'special marks' were awarded about 10 times in the first year indicates effectiveness. Special marks were expected to be extraordinary, and then so many in the first year may indicate that there were many programmes waiting for this occasion to arise. The special marks are too new to judge if they will be effective in stimulating many study programmes in many higher education institutions towards continuous quality improvement.

In a way, the separate accreditation of research master programmes can be seen as a 'special mark' accreditation, too (the research master programmes are treated in § 2.4.1).

Another, more basic way in which the accreditation system might stimulate further quality improvement is by comparing one study programme with other similar programmes in the Netherlands. The old quality assessment system relied largely on this method, as visiting committees included as a rule all programmes in a disciplinary area in their reports (in all protocols, e.g. hbo-Raad, 1990; VSNU, 1999). This idea was abandoned with the accreditation of individual study programmes against certain 'objective' standards, partly based on the results of the study for the Court of Accounts (*Algemene Rekenkamer*) which showed that this comparison was seen as no longer providing a challenge to improve (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2000). However, the Dutch universities continued with their clustered evaluations as before, to allow for national comparisons (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 27). Also, student organisations repeatedly voiced that they saw the national comparison as an important tool for

³³ Accreditation systems with grades are rare worldwide, apparently because grades are not robust, e.g. because accreditation is inherently too subjective as it is relying on (informed) peer review.

student choice, apparently not trusting the accreditation standards to which all were compared. Following this lead of universities and students, the Inspectorate remarked that the hbo sector ought to increase the national comparability³⁴ of accreditation judgements (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2006b, p. 12).

Third, quality improvement could be stimulated by setting high standards. There are, however, no objective means of judging standards in higher education internationally. We can state, though, that the NVAO applies European standards with regard to output levels, i.e. the Dublin Descriptors (which later have been incorporated in European qualification frameworks). Also, the international review of the NVAO in 2007 did not note any problems with regard to standards applied (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007). Similarly, our international interviewees agreed that NVAO standards were high and that Dutch students going abroad were well qualified.

Finally, the accreditation system could stimulate quality improvement by the availability of diverse vbi's. Diversity should stimulate profiling (just like 'special characteristics') as well as—perhaps—setting higher standards than the minimum required by the NVAO. With the introduction of the accreditation system, the market for vbi's was opened. The number of vbi's that entered the Dutch market remained limited, however. In 2008, the list of vbi's 'fulfilling the criteria to perform visitations' on the NVAO-website included seven agencies. This is more than the two in the old quality assessment system (VSNU and hbo Raad), but two of the seven are the successor organisations to those of the umbrella organisations (QANU and NQA). One had been active already among the privately funded higher education institutions which had not been part of the old quality assessment system (Certiked). Three others are specialised agencies for certain fields of knowledge (engineering, business studies, public administration); two of these are based in Germany, one is a European association. Moreover, the bulk of visitations are performed through QANU and NQA among the publicly funded institutions and by Certiked among the privately funded higher education institutions (interview 04-29). Accordingly, the market for vbi's remains in fact limited, and the stimulus for diversity of standards for individual study programmes equally remains limited. It should be noted, besides, that evaluation agencies known as setting high standards are not on the NVAO list and do not

³⁴ For comparison of study programmes, other policy instruments are more suited than accreditation. The Ministry of OCW since the 1980s supported the publication of printed comparative guides (*Keuzegids*), and since early 2006 this has been stepped up to the interactive website www.studiekeuze123.nl.

function within the current accreditation system. For instance, in the area of business studies it is international good practice to strive for the 'triple crown' (accreditation by AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS).³⁵ Moreover, the international review of the NVAO suggested that the open market system contributed to the 'low trust' in the development of the accreditation system (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 6).

A debated issue is the efficiency of the system: is it a costly way of assuring basic quality? The Inspection's mid-term review concluded (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005a, pp. 7-8):

The costs of accreditation for publicly funded higher education amount to ca. € 10 million per year. This concerns 0.36% of the total of resources available to higher education on the national budget 2005. For private higher education, the costs can only be estimated globally to be € 2 to 3 million. These sums contain the costs of institutions for the work of external organisations, the NVAO and the vbi's, and the government's budget for the NVAO. Besides, institutions incur internal costs for accreditation, especially for composing a self-evaluation. Crucial is which of these costs can (may) be ascribed to the accreditation and which to the internal quality management of the institution.³⁶

The tariffs of the different vbi's were quite similar, but from the point of view of higher education institutions costs could be reduced by clustering accreditation processes of similar programmes (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005a, p. 8).

Higher education institutions that did not have extensive internal quality management until 2003 had to invest in upgrading these activities; this applied especially to universities and to privately funded higher education institutions (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005a, p. 8). For the whole country, this may have meant additional costs of about € 1 million per year. Other elements increasing the costs of the accreditation system included:

³⁵ Such triple accreditation may be more of a marketing tool than actual proof of high quality, but the point is that profiling using quality arguments is not limited to the 'official' accreditation system.

³⁶ Authors' translation. Original: 'De kosten van accreditatie bedragen in het bekostigd onderwijs zo'n € 10 mln. per jaar. Het gaat om 0,36% van het totaal aan middelen dat overeenkomstig de Rijksbegroting in 2005 beschikbaar is voor de toerusting van het hoger onderwijs. Voor het aangewezen onderwijs kunnen de externe kosten slechts globaal worden geschat op € 2 à 3 mln. Alle bedragen omvatten de kosten die de instellingen maken voor het werk van de externe organisaties, de NVAO en de VBI's, en de rijksbijdrage aan de NVAO. Daarnaast maken de instellingen ook interne kosten voor de accreditatie, met name voor het opstellen van een zelfevaluatie. Cruciaal is hier welke kosten aan accreditatie kunnen (mogen) worden toegerekend en welke aan de interne kwaliteitszorg van de onderwijsinstelling.'

- Tax regime: vbi's are subject to VAT (BTW), increasing the total cost by circa € 1 million per year;
- Splitting old university programmes into bachelor and master phases that were to be accredited separately led to cost increases of ca. € 0.5 million per year;

In the same report, the Inspectorate also mentioned some aspects reducing the costs of the accreditation system, such as the longer cycle (six instead of five years, but the actual cycle under the old quality assessment system was longer than the official five years, especially in the hbo sector), a shift of government subsidies and the expectation that efficiency gains could be made in later years by the higher education institutions after building up their internal quality management systems.³⁷

3.2.2 *Improvement of quality and effectiveness of accreditation in Dutch-Flemish cooperation*

The NVAO is a unique organisation among accreditation agencies, because it operates in the two distinct higher education systems of Flanders and the Netherlands. This report only concerns the functioning of NVAO in the Netherlands. However, the international committee reviewing the NVAO in 2007 made some suggestions to increase the similarity between the Dutch and Flemish accreditation systems, because notwithstanding some inevitable political and legislative differences more harmonisation would be possible and, according to the Committee, desirable (Committee for the review of the Accreditation Organization of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), 2007, p. 27, not repeating elements mentioned before):

- Introduction of protection of academic titles in the Netherlands;
- Harmonisation of accreditation cycles.

The Committee feared that the absence of legal protection of titles in the Netherlands still would leave openings to providers offering non-accredited programmes. The Flemish legal protection of titles would protect society better against rogue higher education.

The Committee was also afraid that the faster pace of accreditation (six-year cycle) in the Netherlands, compared with the eight-year one in Flanders, might lead to problems, including loss of quality improvement, using up all available peers as

³⁷ The VSNU investigated the additional costs of proposed legal changes in 2006, but hardly commented on the accreditation costs on that occasion .

reviewers, and higher costs. As the design for the next cycle is already under discussion, and the ministers concerned already replied to these and other remarks from the review committee (Plasterk & Vandenbroucke, 2008), in the current report we will not go into that discussion in-depth.

4 International reflection on the bachelor–master structure

In this chapter an international perspective on the implementation of the bachelor–master system and accreditation system will be presented. To provide the broad background, a brief overview will be given of the progress of the Bologna Declaration (1999). In the following sections two key components of the Bologna Declaration, namely the introduction of the Bachelor–master structure and accreditation will be treated from an international perspective. Then sections follow concerning curriculum innovations and international student mobility. The final section of this chapter presents elements of the international perception of Dutch higher education as evidenced by interviews.

4.1 The Bologna process

In this section the Bologna process will be briefly examined. First an historical overview of the main points evolved from the Bologna process will be given. Second, the overall progress of the Netherlands in relation to the other participating countries will be discussed.

4.1.1 *Historical overview of the Bologna process*

The Bologna Declaration triggered changes in higher education systems throughout the countries who signed the treaty. Originally, there were 29 signatory parties, which increased to 46 now, including all 27 EU member states. The ultimate aim of the Bologna Declaration was to construct a single European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 through increased compatibility and comparability of higher education systems, in order to facilitate internal mobility for students, graduates and higher education institution staff members, but also to make European higher education more recognisable and attractive to students and scholars from outside Europe. The original declaration consisted of six action lines. In later ministerial summit meetings new issues were added to the action lines. The action lines are:³⁸

³⁸ [http://bologna-project.pbwiki.com/Bologna Action Lines](http://bologna-project.pbwiki.com/Bologna%20Action%20Lines) (accessed 2008-04-15).

Bologna conference (1999)

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles
3. Establishment of a system of credits
4. Promotion of mobility
5. Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance
6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

Prague conference (2001)

7. Focus on Lifelong learning
8. Inclusion of higher education institutions and students
9. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

Berlin conference (2003)

10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

In 2005 the conference was held in Bergen. Here two main points were addressed: (1) Achieving the goals, via partnerships, social dimension and external dimension, and (2) Emphasis on implementation of action lines.

The most recent ministerial follow-up conference was held in London in 2007. This conference resulted in a more intense focus on the (1) social dimension (students in Higher Education should be a reflection of the demographic diversity in the society), (2) external dimension (informing the world about the Bologna-process), and (3) data collection (to enhance the comparability). In 2009 the follow-up conference will be organised in Leuven by the Benelux countries and will focus on the continuation of the Bologna process after 2010.

4.1.2 The Bologna process and the Netherlands

In preparation for the 2005 Bergen conference the first Bologna Process Stocktaking was produced for the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). This stocktaking exercise gave an overview of the progress on the action lines for all the countries involved in the Bologna process (now 46 in total). It did so mostly on the basis of standardised national reports submitted by the participating countries' authorities. In 2007 a second Stocktaking report was produced in preparation for the London (Stocktaking Working

Group 2005-2007, 2007). The stocktaking results were summarised into a brief list of indicators.³⁹

The 2007 Stocktaking Report divided the Bologna process in five pillars with twelve 'indicators' related to the action lines. As the implementation of the bachelor–master system and accreditation system will be discussed later in this chapter, our focus now will be on the other action lines. These other action lines fall under the pillars:

- recognition of degrees and study periods,
- life-long learning, and
- joint degrees.

In the following, we shall apply the 'pillars' of the 2007 Stocktaking report, and integrate major findings of the European University Association's (EUA) *Trends V* report (Crosier, Purser, & Smidt, 2007). The EUA published studies among universities in the ever expanding Bologna area before each of the follow-up conferences, anticipating and counterbalancing the stocktaking reports that are focused at the national level.

4.1.3 Recognition of degrees and study periods

The pillar 'recognition of degrees and study periods' consists of three indicators, namely: (1) stage of implementation of diploma supplement, (2) national implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and (3) stage of implementation of ECTS.

4.1.3.1 Stage of implementation of diploma supplement

The Diploma Supplement 'is an instrument to improve transparency - developed to describe the nature, context, content and status of the studies successfully completed - and which all Bologna governments pledged to provide to all students free of charge by 2005' (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 65).

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science reported in its latest national report (2006) that it estimated 75% of the bachelor and master graduates of universities received their diploma supplement automatically. The other 25% received the diploma

³⁹ It must be borne in mind that these are only official indicators, self-reported and not checked. To what extent these national reports reflect the actual state of affairs 'at the chalk-face' of higher education remains an open question. The EUA's *Trends* reports may give some indication of precisely that, especially since they consist not only of questionnaires but also involve site visits.

supplement upon request. No information was available from the hbo institutions. Since higher education institutions are by law obliged to give diploma supplements (art. 7.11 lid 3 WHW), one might expect that all students received it automatically. Since this is not the case, the 2007 stocktaking report gave the Netherlands four points (out of maximum five). This placed the Netherlands behind 27 other participating countries that all scored a five. Noteworthy is that, although the definition did not change, the Netherlands received a lower ranking in 2007 than in 2005.

The 75% figure—if sustained in the hbo sector—would compare favourably with the European average: just under half the higher education institutions responded to the EUA that they issued the diploma supplement as a standard procedure (Crosier et al., 2007).

4.1.3.2 National implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The 'Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region' (Lisbon Recognition Convention) is a treaty (CETS No. 165) signed by 45 countries inside and outside the EU. The treaty deals, among other things, with recognition of prior received qualifications by international students and the acceptance of international students in national higher education systems based on their qualifications. Although the Netherlands signed the treaty in 2002, it has not been ratified until now. Since ratification was the indicator for the 2007 Stocktaking report the Netherlands scored poorly (1 out of 5). The principles of recognition are being applied in practice, and the Dutch agency involved in the ENIC/NARIC networks for recognition, Nuffic, is generally seen as one of the most active and expert organisations of its kind in Europe. Nonetheless formally this is by far the weakest point in the implementation of the Bologna process in the Netherlands in comparison to the other participating countries.

4.1.3.3 Stage of implementation of ECTS

Just as the introduction of two cycles of the bachelor–master structure, the implementation of the ECTS began in 2002. The usage of ECTS is 100% in the first and second cycles of Dutch higher education. Hence in both Stocktaking reports the Netherlands scores the maximum 5. In 2005 the Netherlands was among 20 other participating countries, in 2007 this number increased to 27. An issue for the future in this respect is the application of the credits system in third-cycle programmes.

4.1.4 *Lifelong learning and national qualifications framework*

“New style” qualifications frameworks are tools that are designed with the goals of making qualifications more transparent and learning paths more (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 65). Two European-level qualifications frameworks have been developed. First, the higher education ministers in the Bologna process agreed on a formulating a qualifications framework for higher education, based on the Dublin Descriptors developed at the beginning of the Bologna process (Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003). Soon after, this was integrated in the European Parliament’s qualifications framework all levels of learning, clearly in the context of developing life-long learning across the continent.

During the Bergen follow-up conference (2005) it was decided that the participating countries should improve recognition of prior learning of individuals. The goal was to stimulate the lifelong learning principle by stimulating individuals’ access to higher education on the basis of their experience, instead of only on academic qualifications. The 2007 London conference’s communiqué reiterated this goal: ‘Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components of the EHEA, both internally and in a global context’ (Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2007, p. § 2.5).

The Netherlands has some policies in place to support recognition of prior learning. Nonetheless a formal nation-wide qualifications framework⁴⁰ is missing, so that assessment of prior learning is not based on uniform guidelines across the country. ‘The idea of qualifications frameworks is to provide the overarching system-level architecture into which individual qualifications fit. Their purpose is to enhance transparency, and to make it understandable to citizens how qualifications can be used in a variety of ways – whether for further study or for the labour (Crosier et al., 2007). Because of this, access to higher education programmes and allocation of credits toward a qualification and/or exemption from programmes requirements are not made according to the same standards by all institutions involved. For that reason the 2007 stocktaking report gave the Netherlands 3 out of 5. In comparison: 17 countries scored 5 out of 5 and 11 countries scored 4 out of 5. Nevertheless, only three countries (Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom) have published fully-developed national qualification frameworks until 2007 (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 65).

⁴⁰ This is still not fully implemented. The stakeholders are currently discussing the possibilities (interview 05-13).

4.1.5 *Establishment and recognition of joint degrees*

The establishment and recognition of joint degrees is strongly promoted by the EU and involved institutions. The London follow-up conference mentioned in this respect: 'at national level, we will work to implement fully the agreed recognition tools and procedures and consider ways of further incentivising mobility for both staff and students. This includes encouraging *a significant increase in the number of joint programmes ...*' (Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2007, § 2.3, emphasis added).

Although the Netherlands belong to the countries with a relatively high degree of participation in study programmes in which higher education institutions from several countries take part (Crosier et al., 2007), regulation of the ensuing degrees is still only partially in place. Double-degree programmes (two participating higher education institutions from different countries *both* issue a diploma to graduates) are not uncommon, but as yet legislation is lacking to establish joint degrees (with cooperation among several higher education institutions from different countries leading to a single diploma for graduates, e.g. in Erasmus Mundus programmes). Legislation is currently being prepared and has been promised to Parliament for 2008 (Tweede-Kamerstuk 2007-2008; 31288, nr. 18; interview 05-13).

It seems that many other participating countries are more or less in the same situation. The Netherlands is amongst a group of 16 countries in which legislation does not specifically refer to joint degrees or where legislation is being prepared (Stocktaking Working Group 2005-2007, 2007). These countries score 4 out of 5. The remaining participating countries all score 5 out of 5, i.e. these countries have implemented legislation which allows and encourages establishing joint degrees.

An issue in establishing and officially recognising (e.g. through accreditation) joint degrees are the different variants of bachelor–master systems across countries. For instance, in Germany two-year master programmes are the rule, making cooperation with one-year programmes in the Netherlands problematic. Another German rule of behaviour is that study programmes should not last longer than five years in total, making cooperation of hbo institutions (with their four-year bachelor cycle) in two-year master programmes difficult (Nickel, Westerheijden, & Zdebel, 2008). This is not to say that all adaptations have to be made in the Dutch regulation; e.g. the five-year rule is not a legal rule, but just a (hard to change) rule of thumb in Germany.

Another problem that hbo institutions may run into is that in Flanders and many other higher education systems 'professional master programmes' are either not

recognised or viewed with suspicion as the term is used to cover many different and not always trusted study programmes in those countries (Crosier et al., 2007).

There also are complications with regard to accreditation of cross-border study programmes: legal regulations are geared to programmes operating purely within the national borders and often in the legal seats of the higher education institutions. Joint programmes often have to be accredited twice, or special arrangements have to be negotiated *ad hoc* (Nickel et al., 2008). Again the details of different regulations across countries pose problems that are hard to overcome, e.g. the prohibition against issuing B.A. or B.Sc. in Dutch hbo institutions, whereas their German counterparts are allowed to use those titles (Nickel et al., 2008).

4.1.6 *European curriculum innovation projects*

On a formal level, the Bologna process is concerned with harmonising degree structures, quality assurance schemes such as accreditation, organising courses according to ECTS, etc., but does not directly influence the content of study programmes in higher education. If—and if so to what extent—curricula are innovated, depends more on stimuli at the national and institutional levels (Witte, 2006).

Curriculum innovation initiatives across European country borders are mostly found in double or joint degree projects, and in the large project ‘Tuning educational structures in Europe’, commonly called ‘Tuning’ (<http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>). The aim of this multi-year project, funded with support of the EU’s Socrates programme, is to reach agreement among academic teaching staff from many different countries at the level of certain disciplines, to reach agreement on common requirements in terms of learning outcomes and competences for a master degree in for instance history or education. One of the two general coordinators is Robert Wagenaar of the University of Groningen; obviously then, Dutch higher education plays a role in this curriculum innovation project.

4.2 Bachelor–master degrees in an international perspective

The implementation of the bachelor–master system in the Netherlands was triggered by the Bologna declaration in 1999, just as in many other signatory countries. This gives the unique opportunity to evaluate the introduction of the bachelor–master system in the Netherlands in relation to introduction of what is nominally the same system in the other participating countries. Before going in to the actual implementation, two indicators taken from the Stocktaking reports (2005 and 2007),

will be discussed. These issues are: access to the next cycle and implementation of a national qualification framework.

4.2.1 *Stocktaking indicators*

The 'access to the next cycle' indicator measures to what degree first cycle qualification give access to second cycle programmes and to what degree second cycle qualifications give access to third cycle programme. Access is defined as: 'The right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education' (art. 1 of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1997). In the 2007 stocktaking report there were 37 countries that received the maximum score (5 out of 5). The Netherlands was among this group. Therefore this part of the implementation of the bachelor–master structure seems to be well implemented in the Dutch Higher Education system. The Netherlands made progress on this indicator since 2005. The 2005 Stocktaking report gave the Netherlands on this point 4 out of 5, which meant 'there is relatively smooth access for the majority of students with minor structural or procedural problems'.

The indicator 'implementation of a national qualification framework' was introduced in the 2007 Stocktaking report as agreed in the Bergen follow-up conference (2005). In Bergen the ministers had agreed that participating countries should have started work on the national qualification framework by 2007. As mentioned above, the Netherlands national qualification framework is in preparation, and will be designed in conjunction with the overarching qualification framework for the EHEA.⁴¹ Hence the Netherlands scored 3 out of 5. With this score the Netherlands is among 10 other countries, ahead of 24 countries, but lagging behind 11 countries.

4.2.2 *International perspective on the bachelor–master transition*

4.2.2.1 Introduction of two-cycle degree system

Since the implementation of the two cycles of the bachelor–master system is an event taking place internationally, a comparison on the progress can be made. Both stocktaking reports (2005 & 2007) included the indicator 'stage of implementation of the first and second cycle'. Both times, the Netherlands scored 5 out of 5. In 2005, 16

⁴¹ From the *Trends V* report it appeared that having a national qualifications framework is not sufficient: the higher education institutions must know it and work with it, which in 2006-2007 only seemed to be the case in Ireland.

other countries also had the maximum score; in 2007 this number had grown to 22 (out of 45). This shows that the Netherlands went ahead fast with introducing the bachelor–master system (cf. also Witte, 2006). For instance, even some neighbouring countries were less advanced in 2007: Belgium (Flemish community) scored 4 out of 5 and Germany 3 out of 5. This means that Flanders had 60% to 89% of its students in the two-cycle system, and Germany 30% to 59%. Flanders expected to complete the introduction of the two-cycle system in 2008-2009 (with the exception of some master with a longer than average duration) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). Germany expected the transition to be completed by 2010 (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2006).

4.2.2.2 Articulation of the two cycles: independence and transition

The intention of the two-cycle degree system in the Bologna Declaration was, amongst other things, to introduce a shorter study programme than the long single-cycle degree usual on the European continent in order to get more graduates with some higher education experience on the labour market rather than have dropped-out students without any certification of the qualifications they gained in their years of experiencing higher education. Hence the emphasis in the Bologna Declaration on establishing a first cycle leading to ‘...degree ... [which] shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification’ (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 1999). As an almost self-evident condition for the first degree, i.e. the bachelor degree, to be accepted as relevant, the first phase must be seen in society as an independent course of study. The independent status was stressed in the Bologna Declaration by stating: ‘Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies’. In terms of the current discussion in the Netherlands: a ‘hard cut’ between the bachelor and master cycles was presupposed. This was also the situation in the ‘model’ countries that already had a mature two-cycle degree system, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The normal expectations of students first entering higher education would be to take a three-year or four-year study programme,⁴² leading to a bachelor degree. The bachelor degree is the normal degree with which to enter the labour market.⁴³ For instance, in 2005/2006 in the USA 1,485,000 bachelor degrees were awarded and master degrees amounted

⁴² In the United Kingdom, a bachelor study usually takes three years, in the United States it is a four-year study. In some cases, after four years, students in Britain may obtain a *bachelor honours* degree.

⁴³ In academic professions such as law and medicine, entry to the profession requires a master degree, which in some case in the UK (but not in the USA) can be taken as a single-cycle, four-year study.

only to 40% of that number (694,000) according to federal statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/>, table 258, accessed 2008-07-21). Achieving a master degree in the UK or USA might follow 'end-on' (i.e. directly after the bachelor cycle), but equally could be taken—if at all—after some years of working experience. For instance, business schools as a rule require MBA students to have a number of years of working experience. In those countries, moreover, it is self-evident that entry into a master study requires a completed bachelor degree and a selection process.

On the European continent, the traditional university view that 'full' higher education means achieving a master degree remained strong. The Netherlands are not the only country where initially students were more or less given the right to continue master-level studies after obtaining a bachelor degree. In combination with a practice employing smooth transition regulations rather than strict selection, this undermined the independent status of the new and therefore still little-recognised bachelor degree. A very pertinent example comes from Switzerland. As in the Netherlands, in Switzerland the degree system was reformed in line with the Bologna Declaration, and originally the view prevailed that 'complete' higher education meant obtaining a master degree. Again like in the Netherlands, a type of 'continuation master' existed in which students could enter without further requirements beyond having the appropriate type of bachelor degree (Schweizerische Universitätskonferenz, 2006, art 3-3); in practice a 'hard cut' was not maintained, it appears. This situation has been changed recently to boost the acceptance of the bachelor degree as an independent, complete higher education degree. Universities are no longer obliged to offer one or more master programmes without selection requirements. They are still free to do so, thus opening up an area where higher education institutions can distinguish themselves from each other in their approach to students with regard to their admission strategy to master programmes. The development is too recent to find full-fledged university admission strategies in public sources until the end of this report's editing.

4.2.3 *Developments in curriculum and student mobility*

4.2.3.1 European curriculum innovation projects

Due to the increased compatibility of higher education systems throughout Europe aimed at by the Bologna Process and the concomitant introduction of bachelor–master systems in many countries, the idea was that more joint education projects between higher education institutions in the participating countries would emerge.

Regarding the highest level of integration, i.e. study programmes leading to a *joint degree* given out on behalf of several higher education institutions, the WHW legislation requiring most Master programmes to total 60 EC, together with the programme accreditation requirements, make development and awarding of joint degrees with higher education institutions in other countries difficult in the Netherlands (see also § 4.1.5). Also based on the national reports submitted for the Stocktaking reports (2005 & 2007) we can conclude that the Netherlands is lagging behind in comparison to many neighbouring countries, although some interviewees in Sweden and Denmark observed that joint degrees were not simple to organise in their countries either (interviews 04-24b; 04-25).

Looking more generally at joint and double degrees, interviewees from several countries remarked that Dutch higher education institutions are very active at the European level (interviews 04-24c, 04-29c, 05-07). Likewise, the *Trends V* report noted that the Netherlands are in the vanguard together with Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the UK (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 30; cf. also Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2006).

Having a legal framework to support joint and double degrees can be an important stimulus. For instance, in Flanders four years after introducing the legal framework in which international joint and double degrees can be awarded and recognised at all levels and cycles and one year after introducing a decree on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education, every university and almost all *hogescholen* had become active in the field of joint and double degrees (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). A similar situation exists in Germany, where appropriate legislation has been in place 'for many years' and 'German higher education institutions participate in almost half of the Masters programmes funded by Erasmus Mundus' (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2006).

4.2.4 *Student mobility*

Improving student mobility was prominent in the introduction of the bachelor–master system (*IJkpuntenbrief*, Staatssecretaris Hoger Onderwijs, 2003). The goal was to increase both the inflow of foreign students and outflow of Dutch students.

Looking at all forms of registered mobility, in the academic year 2003/2004 close to 50,000 international students studied in the Netherlands and over 18,000 Dutch students studied abroad. While the number of international students in the Dutch higher education system has consistently increased, the number of Dutch students

abroad seems to have declined in the recent years. This section presents some evidence on the main trends in terms of student mobility in Dutch universities and compares the evidence with that in other countries, although it is too early to draw any conclusive generalisations as to their connection with the bachelor–master degrees. It has to be recognised that international comparative data on various higher education internationalisation measures have been constantly improved, yet many challenges remain. For example, not all mobile students are administered and some numbers are therefore missing or underestimated; separation between degree mobility⁴⁴ and credit students⁴⁵ is not always applied consistently across countries, which makes cross-country comparison difficult; and data from various sources (UNESCO, OECD, Nuffic) often give considerably different impressions although all can claim to be authoritative data sources. Therefore the evidence presented below should be interpreted as an illustration of general trends rather than as hard and definitive facts.

The number of international students in the Netherlands, as we mentioned, has consistently increased since the end of 1990s. According to the estimates by Nuffic, about 49,750 international students studied in the Netherlands in the year 2006. This estimate includes students who study towards a Dutch higher education degree as well as mobility for credits. International students make up about 8.7% of all students in Dutch higher education institutions (Nuffic, 2006).

Figure 4 presents trends percentages of international degree students since 1999 in the Netherlands and the other EU countries. The Netherlands (the heavy line in the figure) is slightly below the EU average in terms of the proportion of international students. Especially France, the United Kingdom and Austria stand out as countries with high percentages of foreign students. The percentage of international students in the Netherlands increased significantly between 2002 and 2004 but the trend stabilised after that. The consistent growth in international student numbers characterises many European countries and leaves the relative position of the Netherlands more or less unchanged (Nuffic, 2006).

⁴⁴ Degree mobility means that students go abroad for a whole study programme, obtaining a degree from a foreign higher education institution. For degree mobility, the crucial question is if the foreign degree will be recognised at the appropriate level in their home country.

⁴⁵ Credit students or credit mobility denotes students going abroad for one or several course modules, returning to their home country (and home institution) to obtain their degree. For credit mobility, the recognition of credits is the major issue (for which ECTS was developed).

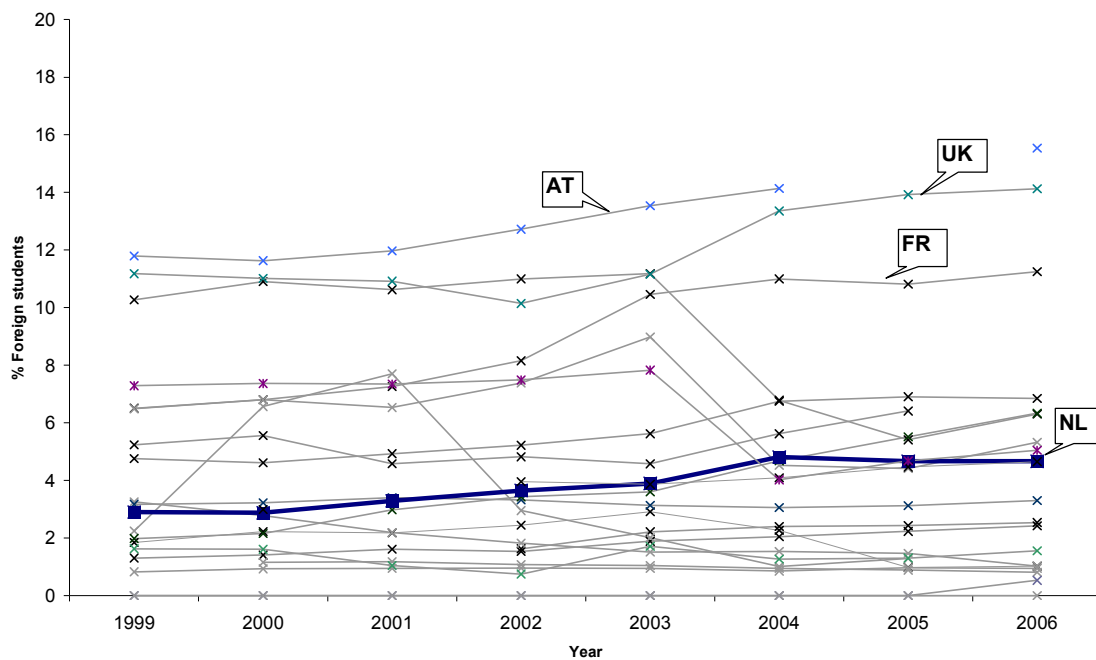


Fig. 8 Proportion of international students in EU countries, 1999-2006 (except Luxemburg and Cyprus)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre online

The majority of international students in the Netherlands hail from Germany (13,900 or 28% of all international students), followed by China (4,950), Belgium (2,400), and Spain (2,000). The relative position of these countries has been quite stable over recent years. While the number of German students has consistently increased over the years, the number of Chinese students has somewhat declined. The loss of students from China is related to developments in the Chinese as well as in the Dutch higher education systems. The Chinese higher education system has considerably developed and is now able to accommodate a larger share of its own students. On the Dutch side, the tuition for non-EU students has been increased and an emphasis on quality requirements rather than student numbers has been strengthened, e.g. through the introduction of the Neso certificate (Nuffic 2006).⁴⁶

The most popular areas of study at publicly funded higher education institutions among foreign students are Economics and Behaviour & Society. Economics is growing in popularity; foreign enrolment in Agriculture dropped significantly (with fewer

⁴⁶ The Neso Certificate provides an assessment of the candidate's proficiency in English and of the educational diplomas needed for admission to a Dutch higher education institution.

Chinese students in particular). Most foreign students in publicly funded education are following a bachelor's programme.

Moving from inbound to outbound mobility, the number of Dutch students studying abroad for a degree dropped in the year 2000 but started to increase again somewhat in early 2000s (Nuffic, 2006). According to UNESCO data, the *total* number of Dutch students abroad dropped from 13,090 in 1999 to 10,284 in 2006 (UNESCO; see also Fig. 9). The proportion of Dutch students abroad is around 2.4 per cent, which is somewhat below the EU average of 2.6% (Nuffic, 2006). Currently the UK and Belgium are the primary destinations for Dutch students in the UNESCO statistics, followed by Germany and United States. Seventy-five percent of Dutch students going abroad have chosen another EU Member State as host country.

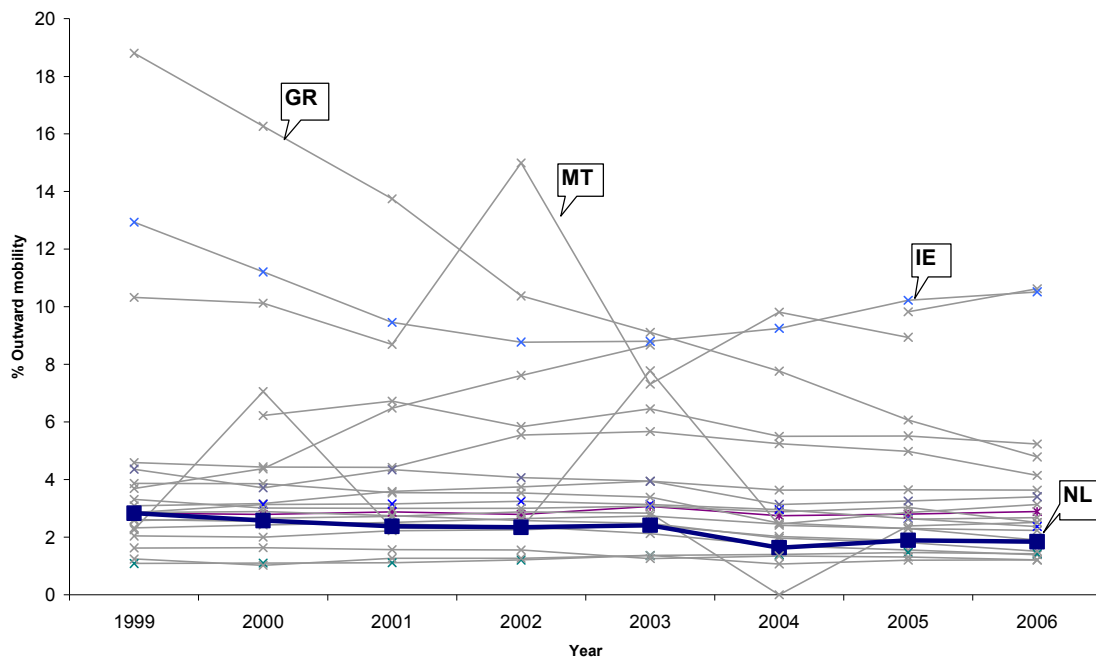


Fig. 9 Proportion of students from EU countries studying abroad, 1999-2006 (except Luxemburg and Cyprus)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Centre online

In terms of *credit mobility*, the number of students who were mobile during their studies peaked in 2000 and then started to decline (Fig. 10). One of the possible hypotheses for this decline links it with the introduction of the bachelor–master system,⁴⁷ although it is too early to draw any final conclusions and other factors may

⁴⁷ This explanation was reiterated by Nuffic general director Van der Eijnden in an interview with *NRC Handelsblad*, 2008-06-24 'Animo voor Erasmusbeurs in Nederland daalt': it is not distinctive among

equally explain the decline (Nuffic 2006). In the hbo sector a similar decline started already in 1999. An alternative explanation links the decline in the hbo mobility with the economic boom in the Netherlands around the year 2000 (Nuffic 2006).

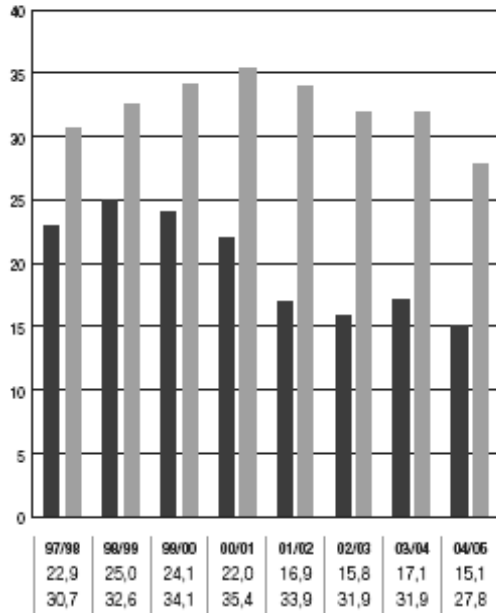


Fig. 10 Percentage of relevant outbound credit mobility in percentages by higher education sector (1997/1998-2004/2005; dark = hbo, light = university)

Source: Nuffic 2006:44.

The one-year master programmes are a factor that influences student mobility. Often these programmes are deemed too short to include a period of study abroad. Also, several programmes had to abandon joint programme agreements because of the prohibitive costs involved, in that way detracting from the recognition of Dutch higher education abroad (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2007, p. 7).

Comparing the different implementation strategies of the bachelor–master systems of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany no clear distinction in effects on the student mobility can be seen. All three countries seem to have more inflow of students from foreign countries each year. In these countries the outflow seems to remain quite constant, except for Germany which shows an upwards trend.⁴⁸

In sum, the Netherlands seem to have become somewhat more attractive for foreign students in the last ten years, but relatively to other EU countries the ranking of the

students to be mobile in the fairly similar European higher education systems and they rather study for a period outside Europe.

⁴⁸ Eurostat: Mobility of students in Europe; Tertiary Education (<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/>)

Netherlands hardly changed. Regarding outward mobility, the proportion of students going abroad either for a full degree or for credit mobility seems to have dropped rather than increased. We repeat our caveat that the time series since the introduction of the bachelor–master system have been too short, and the figures from different sources too contradictory to draw definitive conclusions.

4.3 Implementation of accreditation in Europe

4.3.1 Position of the Netherlands in comparison to other EU-countries

The Bologna process was used in many countries to reform elements of their higher education systems (Witte, 2006). These included curricula and quality assurance arrangements in a number of cases. After 1999, accreditation became an increasingly popular manner of quality assurance; it had been so in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism in 1989/1990, but after 1999 it also reached Western Europe (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004; Westerheijden, 2001). The Netherlands was among the many countries that introduced accreditation at the programme level in order to assure the quality of the new degrees (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2004).

The Netherlands has ever since followed the European guidelines and can therefore be judged to be in the mainstream of quality assurance developments in Europe.

Both the Ministry of OCW and the NVAO are very active participants in the European policy-making with regard to quality. The Ministry was closely involved in the initiation of the Dublin Descriptors in 2002 (Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003). The NVAO is a member of ENQA which championed the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003a, pp. 11-12, 2005c, pp. 10, 21-22) and was confirmed in that membership position by the international review that confirmed NVAO's compliance with the ESG (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005). Besides, the NVAO has been one of the driving forces behind the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), a group of thirteen accreditation agencies aiming to achieve mutual recognition of their accreditation decisions (www.eaconsortium.net). This should simplify intra-European mobility of graduates. The NVAO in May 2008 had agreements for mutual recognition of

accreditations with six ECA-members (interview 04-25; making up half of all ECA mutual recognition agreements at that time).⁴⁹

Most international interviewees responded that the quality of Dutch higher education and the accreditation by the NVAO carried high credibility abroad. Three of the 15 interviewed persons had a more intermediate opinion of it, including some staff members of Nuffic, because in their contacts with countries in e.g. South-East Asia they came across the privately funded higher education institutions that did not yet have their study programmes accredited.

A minority of countries in the early 2000s maintained or started institutional-level quality assurance schemes, such as the UK (institutional audits), Norway (in some of its schemes; others concerned study programmes) and Switzerland (evaluation of faculties). The two most prominent Western European countries that at first had introduced programme-level accreditation, i.e. Germany and the Netherlands, started reconsidering this choice around 2007, after a number of years of experience. Both now seem to be moving towards making the process one with a 'lighter touch' by giving more attention to larger organisational entities (exact forms are unknown as yet).

An aim of the Dutch accreditation scheme was to maintain the previous quality assessment scheme's emphasis on quality improvement. The element of quality improvement or quality enhancement is being given renewed attention in several European initiatives in recent years, recognising that the focus on threshold quality inherent in accreditation is necessary but not sufficient for the excellence drive desired for, e.g. the Lisbon strategy needs.

4.4 International perceptions of Dutch higher education

The current section summarises a number of aspects of the reception of Dutch higher education since the introduction of the bachelor–master structure in selected other European countries (Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom), based mainly on our 15 interviews with international experts. Where applicable, interviewees' remarks have been integrated in the previous sections, but here we wish to emphasise the image of Dutch higher education and of Dutch students in the eyes of fairly informed foreigners.

⁴⁹ As a final indication of NVAO's internationally prominent position, it became the seat of the secretariat of the world-wide quality assessment agencies' organisation, INQAAHE, in 2008.

4.4.1 Acceptance and comparability of graduates and degree titles

Although the issue of the different titles between hbo and universities was partly discussed in chapter 2 already, we asked our interviewees about their understanding of the differences between Dutch degrees and those in their own country, and about the differences between university and hbo titles and the relevance they attached to those differences.

Concerning the compatibility of Dutch bachelor and master degrees with those of the countries of the interviewees, mostly broad compatibility was indicated. Some mentioned, though, that Dutch one-year master programmes were seen as different from their own two-year programmes. A few interviewees, referring to the UK and to Denmark, emphasised that this was not just a matter of counting years, but that the competencies of one-year masters were less than those of two-year masters (interview 04-24a, 05-22a); thus Dutch graduates from two-year master programmes were more readily accepted on those countries' labour markets.

The level of understanding the difference between the titles from universities and from hbo institutions differed with the amount of contacts that interviewees had had with students from the Netherlands (credential recognition officers as a rule had been well informed by their colleagues from Nuffic) and with the presence of a binary system in their own country. However, even in countries with binary systems the distinction was always understood in society (interview 04-23). Moreover, interviewees reported that in their countries people intended to interpret the Dutch binary distinction in terms of the binary divide in their own country (e.g. interviews 04-24c, 04-25, 04-29a, 05-09); especially there seemed to be a tendency to understand hbo institutions and their degrees as *Fachhochschulen* in Germany, as *hogescholen* in Flanders, as *polytechnics* of the pre-1992 British higher education system, etc. Or the difference between the sectors was not understood in the system, especially but not only in unitary higher education systems (e.g. interviews 04-23, 04-25, 04-29a, 04-29c). In the more regulated public sector of the labour market, e.g. in Germany, binary distinctions carried more weight (interviews 04-29a, 04-29b).

On questions about the relevance of the difference between degrees from hbo institutions and universities, especially a British interviewee went into more detail about this, explained that in their country, different bachelor degrees were seen as different routes but of basically the same level and therefore not much of a distinction between the two sectors was made. Employers often did not care for the finer

distinctions: 'They want graduateness' (interview 04-29c; similar in 04-29b).⁵⁰ And: 'Titles only play to role for recognition of professional standards' (interview 04-29a).

To admission officers for master programmes in higher education institutions in several countries, the difference between hbo and university degrees might sometimes be somewhat more important, but that depended very much on the individual university (interviews 04-29a, 04-29c).

4.4.2 *Mobility to and from the Netherlands*

4.4.2.1 Condition for mobility: Programmes taught in English and English proficiency

The widespread use of English as language of instruction is meant to promote the international orientation of Dutch higher education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, p.12). The offer of course modules and whole degree programmes in English in Dutch higher education institutions is the most extended of all non-English speaking countries in Europe. But according to the Inspection of Education the English proficiency of teachers and students does not always match the wealth of English-taught programmes (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2005c, p. 20). The Inspection's concerns applied both to the universities and to hbo institutions. However, foreign credential evaluators, mobility officers and ministry representatives in our interviews were of the opinion that the level of English mastered by Dutch students and staff members engaged in outward mobility was quite high (all interviews⁵¹).

4.4.2.2 Views on mobility

Interviewees from Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK indicated that student mobility to and from the Netherlands was among the easiest in Europe: there were very few problems or complaints. Some remarks were made about lacking Diploma Supplements for holders of especially older degrees (mainly pre-2003, interview 04-25). Some of the interviewees also mentioned practical problems for students who wanted to move across Europe. Practical problems related mostly to the different organisation and calendars of the academic years, translation of Dutch exam

⁵⁰ In Sweden, employer reactions to the bachelor–master system and international mobility are due to be evaluated in 2009 (interview 04-25).

⁵¹ With one exception, a respondent from Flanders, where of course Dutch is the language of communication for Dutch students.

grades into other systems⁵² and to the limited portability and access to student grant systems across the countries (e.g. interview 04-29a).

Regarding mobility of teaching and research staff members, our interviews uncovered few specific points, except that issues like pension schemes make it difficult to include longer-term mobility into a person's career (e.g. interview 04-24c). Also, the translation of Dutch staff positions into foreign ones was less than straightforward, e.g. in Germany.

4.4.3 *Strong and weak points of Dutch higher education and students*

Interviewees often stressed that it was difficult for them to give general characteristics of Dutch students and Dutch higher education compared to their own; much depended on the individual students and on the individual experiences of interviewees with partners in the Netherlands. However, to the extent that generalisations may apply, the following points were noteworthy.

A first impression was that Dutch graduates were quite similar to British ones. There was a high level of satisfaction (interview 04-29c). The Dutch higher education system was characterised by openness to English (interviews 04-23, 04-29a), leading to a high level of proficiency among students and staff members.

Courses in Dutch higher education institutions were seen as more innovative, more work-oriented (e.g. through projects) than many in Germany and Flanders (interviews 04-22, 04-29b, 05-07, 05-09), although the German dual learning system would give still better preparation for the labour market.

The two points mentioned just now would make Dutch students more international and worldly in attitude than e.g. their Flemish counterparts. Also, they would have stronger report writing skills.

The reverse of these differences was, according to the same set of interviewees, that Dutch students had less knowledge than Flemish ones. Moreover, the attitude of students in the Netherlands was different: they were less focused on studying than on being students and more often had part-time jobs.

⁵² Information on grades and grade systems ought to be part of the Diploma Supplement, but that is not applied 100% in the Netherlands yet. Moreover, interviewees may have referred to pre-Diploma Supplement situations.

5 Conclusions and recommendations for future developments

Based on the information gathered we can draw a number of conclusions, leading to some recommendations for future developments of the bachelor–master degree system and its accreditation. In this chapter, we shall return to the list of evaluation questions underlying our study, among them the *IJkpunten*, more explicitly than was visible in the structure of the previous chapters.

5.1 Initial objectives of the bachelor–master reform

5.1.1 IJkpunt: *The proportion of programmes translated into the bachelor–master structure*

Full success.

5.1.2 IJkpunt: *The extent to which the previous university programmes are divided into two phases (bachelor and master) without creating completely new programmes.*

Hardly any cases were found offending against this rule; this was not a problem worth mentioning. There are fewer master programmes than there were graduation topics (*afstudeerrichtingen*) in universities.

Also, it was not allowed that after the transition of university programmes, they would offer programmes content-wise belonging to post-initial training or competing with hbo programmes. Again, hardly any cases were found offending this rule. The deeper issue is the different funding schemes for university and hbo sectors, with its threat of ‘unfair competition’, and that remains a point for discussion.

5.1.3 IJkpunt: *Students' transition into the new system or completing studies for the 'old-style' degree and limitation of delay in individual study planning*

These two *ijkpunten* are interrelated, and they are typical transition phase issues. They were worries in advance, but no problems worth mentioning after five years were encountered.

5.1.4 IJkpunt: *Recognition of Dutch higher education abroad*

(See conclusions on international issues, below.)

5.1.5 IJkpunt: *Flexibility and freedom of choice for students*

This point is concerned with several sub-issues, namely options for transition for students between institutions, and between areas of knowledge at the point of the transition from bachelor degree to master phase.

5.1.5.1 Transition bachelor–master for university bachelor graduates

It is early days to draw definitive conclusions, as the master phase has been in operation only since a few years. At this moment we can point to the following emergent trends.

The basic right of university students to enrol in a university-master after completing a university-bachelor is ensured by the '*doorstroommasters*', which have been established in all universities. Mobility to 'other' university master programmes started slowly, but seems to be increasing to ca. 11% of university bachelor students changing universities, although statistics are only indicative as yet. For that reason, the original questions regarding switching between universities and between areas cannot be answered in much detail. The total enrolment in university master programmes is rather diverse, with also about 20-30% (depending on years and way of calculating) of enrolment made up of hbo bachelor degree holders and another maybe 20% of foreign students. Further research into the quantitative and qualitative development of enrolment in university master programmes is advisable. More urgently, universities should develop comprehensive admission strategies into their master programmes to adapt to this heterogeneous influx of students; up to now, admission seems to have been regarded as an administrative process rather than as a strategic process focusing on asking equivalence to the faculty's 'own' bachelors rather than defining the competencies and knowledge needed from all enrolling students to complete the master programme successfully and on time.

The debate on the adherence to a 'hard cut' (*'harde knip'*), requiring *all* students to have fulfilled *all* requirements for the bachelor degree before being allowed to enter into a master programme, should lead to a conclusion soon. The independent values of both bachelor and master degrees would be strengthened if the distinction between the two was no longer blurred by 'soft cut' arrangements as in the continuation master programmes (*'doorstroommasters'*). Countries like the UK and the USA where a bachelor-master structure has a long tradition, a clear distinction between bachelor and master cycles is self-evident, and the bachelor degree is seen as full-fledged higher education. The example of Switzerland has been mentioned as a country where thinking in this regard has developed much recently: 'continuation masters', introduced after the Bologna Declaration, are no longer obligatory and higher education institutions are given freedom to formulate their own strategy on enrolment in master programmes.

Pre-master programmes of usually 30 to 60 EC were introduced in Dutch universities to bridge the gap between the end qualifications of bachelors from 'other' fields and from hbo institutions (more on them, below), and the entry qualifications of university master programmes. Some pre-master programmes were set up in cooperation between hbo and university institutions.

Higher education institutions should have arrangements in place to avoid undue delay for students as a result of this, for example by ensuring enrolment immediately upon finishing a pre-master track (perhaps entering master programmes each semester?).

Some issues awaiting further solutions in the area of pre-master programmes include:

- § Quality assurance of pre-master programmes
- § Uncertainty regarding grant/loan (*StuFi*) eligibility for pre-master students
- § Central policy for the funding of pre-master programmes
- § Diversity in admission criteria into pre-master programmes
- § Diversity in tuition fees for pre-master programmes.

Information to assist students in their choice for mobility at the moment of deciding for a master programme is slowly becoming available in the Netherlands (website under development at www.studiekeuze123.nl).

5.1.5.2 Efficiency of study: Retention and degree attainment

There are no reliable time series as yet about student retention and time to degree (bachelor and master) since the bachelor–master reform. Available early figures do not show signs of the hoped-for increase in retention.

Regarding numbers of degrees and if there was a growth due to the bachelor–master reform, we could not give definitive answers as still over 10,000 old-style degrees were awarded in 2006/2007. The number of bachelor and master degrees in the universities is growing rapidly and has overtaken the ‘old-style’ degrees since 2005/2006. The numbers of hbo bachelor degrees remained stable since 2004. Further monitoring in the coming years is needed to answer this question better.

5.1.6 IJkpunt: *Innovation in terms of course content*

The question of curriculum innovation is directed at universities, much more than at the hbo sector. It may be somewhat in contrast with questions at the beginning, voicing fear that programmes would not be based on previously-existing study programmes and would encroach on the hbo master programmes. But here the question is about development of ‘broad bachelor’ programmes and of major-minor models both to increase options for students’ mobility when deciding about a possible master programme but also for the benefit of academic formation (*‘academische vorming’*). Besides the already-started university colleges in Utrecht/Middelburg and Maastricht, one more such college is being designed now in Amsterdam.

Major-minor models have become a mainstream model for bachelor studies nowadays, attesting to goal achievement in this respect at least to some extent. However, there were also signs that the increased demands on specialisation of masters, especially in one-year programmes, implied that the breadth of the bachelor programmes was hard to accomplish.

Further room for curriculum innovation seems to be available in the sense that many bachelor programmes were seen to demand less than full-time study from most students.⁵³

5.1.7 IJkpunt: *transition from higher education to the labour market*

The evaluation study concentrated on the questions of number of degrees attained and on the labour market situation of university bachelor graduates. This new degree is not

⁵³ We will return to master programmes and their innovation below (§ 5.2.2).

yet seen as a degree with labour-market relevance; further action is needed to implement the aspect of the Bologna Declaration focusing on the first degree being relevant to the labour market.

It is estimated that around 5% of the university bachelor graduates wish to enter the labour market. Their chance of getting a job is 96%, not significantly different from university graduates with either an 'old-style' degree or a master degree.

5.2 Emerging issues concerning the bachelor-master reform

5.2.1 IJkpunt: *Transition of hbo bachelor graduates to university master programmes*

Transition from hbo institutions to university master programmes is treated as an emerging issue, although it was already mentioned in the *IJkpuntenbrief*. As intended, the length of time for hbo bachelor graduates to attain a master degree in universities has been reduced to 1.5-2.5 years (from around 3 years). There was no policy intention to increase the number of hbo graduates enrolling in universities, and statistics do not show a marked increase of this type of mobility. Still, hbo bachelor degree holders make up a substantial part of enrolment in university master programmes; estimates are between 20% and 30% (depending on year and method of calculation, as mentioned above). Hbo graduates almost invariably have to follow pre-master tracks; the issues mentioned around pre-master tracks above affect them as well. Intensive cooperation between hbo institutions and universities in some cases has led to 'transition tracks' being integrated into the bachelor phase, thus further reducing the time students need to attain a master degree.

5.2.2 *Diversity of university master programmes*

The diversity of master programmes has increased since first introduction of Bachelor-master model: next to 'standard' master programmes of 60 EC (mostly), 120 EC (in natural sciences and engineering in the university sector) or 180 EC (in medicine etc.), universities developed separately accredited research master programmes (120 EC in all disciplines) and 'top'-master programmes. As the latter are an unregulated category, some interviewees found them decreasing the transparency of the programme supply. Research masters are welcomed in the higher education system, although the number of students enrolling is less than hoped for by parties.

A clear, shared view on the desired character(s) of master programmes and hence their numbers seems to be absent in the Netherlands.

One-year master programmes encounter more difficulties than two-year ones in establishing joint degree programmes internationally.

A renewed discussion on master programmes should address at least these three issues: (1) the desired characters and number of master programmes, connected to (2) the place of 'top master' programmes, as well as (3) hindrances to full cooperation in joint degree programmes.⁵⁴

5.2.3 IJkpunt: *Master programmes in hbo*

182 Master programmes in hbo institutions had been positively accredited by spring 2008. The figures do not show what percentage of the hbo master programmes this represents, or whether these are 'initial' or 'post-initial' programmes.

5.2.4 *Third cycle and professional doctorates*

Later on in the Bologna process (since 2003), the third cycle of doctorates was added to the process. In the Netherlands, this has not yet led to much change in the Ph.D. training that was restructured since the 1990s, although graduate schools integrating master and third-cycle levels have been subject of discussion.

The idea of professional doctorates has remained under discussion, but without much concrete development in recent years.

5.2.5 *Short higher education programmes (associate degrees).*

Short higher education courses are not covered by the Bologna Declaration, but of course are not forbidden by it either. Experiments with Associate Degrees have started in 2006/2007 and will be evaluated separately.

⁵⁴ The latter issue also depends on the legal regulation of joint degree programmes.

5.3 Evaluation of the accreditation scheme

5.3.1 *Support and credibility for accreditation by an independent organisation*

The NVAO has established its position rapidly as the single accreditation organisation for Dutch (and Flemish—but we are limited to the Dutch side) higher education programmes.

The international review of the NVAO in 2007 confirmed that it operates to European standards.

5.3.2 *Transparency through clearly reasoned judgements on quality of programmes*

Frameworks guiding the evaluations were established by the NVAO, and elaborated and applied by the evaluation agencies (*vbi's*). The international review of the NVAO did not uncover problems in this respect.

5.3.3 *Several organisations can perform site visits*

Independent evaluation agencies (*vbi's*) were organised quickly, too, in relation to the establishment of the NVAO. Besides the quality assessment departments of the VSNU and hbo Raad that were made independent, other independent evaluation agencies entered the 'market', too, as was intended. Market dynamics in the sense of study programmes or higher education institutions switching to other evaluation agencies than they had used before, remained limited, however.

5.3.4 *Clarity about administrative consequences in case of too low quality*

The legal reform detailed the consequences of loss of accreditation clearly. After the international review of 2007 and in line with earlier remarks by the Inspection about the severity of the system, because there was too little flexibility for study programmes to make improvements after a negative accreditation decision, a (short) amelioration period was introduced.

5.3.5 *Assurance of quality of privately funded ('aangewezen') higher education*

Privately funded higher education institutions are included in the accreditation system on the same footing as public (*'bekostigd'*) higher education. It seems that the system is equally effective for this part of higher education, although this cannot be asserted

confidently until the end of the first round at the end of 2009, as there still are study programmes making use of the respite they were given not to need accreditation for their operation until then.

5.3.6 Effective and efficient accreditation system

Effectiveness is not easily measured, because much of the improvement function remains 'hidden' in the preliminary process: weak accreditation proposals are mostly withdrawn before an accreditation decision is made and probably even more often before the request even reaches the public stages of the process. The very low number of negative accreditation decisions is therefore of very little significance.

Regarding the efficiency of the system, we rather refer to the ongoing developments for the second round of accreditation, which is aimed at diminishing the transaction costs of the process.

5.3.7 Improvement of quality and effectiveness of accreditation in Dutch-Flemish cooperation

The current evaluation study did not address the issue of the bi-national cooperation explicitly, but quoted from the international review of the NVAO in 2007, which made some remarks in this respect, amongst others about the short cycle length in the Netherlands and about the lack of legal protection of bachelor and master titles in this country.

5.4 International comparison of the reforms in Dutch higher education

5.4.1 How does the transition to bachelor–master degrees compare with other countries?

The Netherlands started the degree reforms quickly and thoroughly. Among the accompanying measures, the use of ECTS was introduced quickly as well. With regard to the Diploma Supplement, practice in the Netherlands is not perfect but reasonably developed (DS is given automatically in 75% of university cases; hbo figure unknown), although the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention to which the Diploma Supplement originally belonged is still awaited. Regulatory reform is also still awaited with regard to enabling joint degree programmes and the development of a Netherlands Qualifications Framework. On the positive side again, the impression

from international sources is that the difference between the reforms-on-paper and the reforms-in-practice is smaller for the Netherlands than for some other countries in the Bologna process.

From a regulatory perspective, and viewing the practices underlying the legal reforms, the Netherlands at this moment is still keeping up well with other countries, although the head-start advantage is being lost.

Effects on student mobility remain limited, as far as statistics can show. Incoming mobility is increasing slowly or remained stable since 2004, more or less in line with developments in other European countries. Outgoing mobility has decreased after 2003. It should be noted, though, that the statistics are far from perfect and do not capture much of the 'free mobility', so that not more than broad trends can be gleaned from them.

5.4.2 How does the accreditation scheme compare with Europe?

The Netherlands at this moment is keeping up well with other countries; NVAO was evaluated positively for compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines in 2007. As with the degree reform, the Netherlands was fast with starting the reform of quality assurance towards accreditation.

The Netherlands is well embedded in the forefront of working towards mutual recognition of accreditation decisions in the EHEA.

Debates about the accreditation system in Germany are broadly similar to those in the Netherlands: the initial choice for programme accreditation is giving way to arguments for more efficiency, for the assessment of larger entities, and possibly putting more trust in the higher education institutions' own organisation of quality assurance for study programmes. Contrary movements, towards stricter and more extended accreditation systems do not occur in any countries with functioning accreditation schemes.

The questions of reception and trust in Dutch higher education as a result of the accreditation scheme will be treated in the next section.

Accreditation of joint programmes leading to double or joint degrees should be simplified, e.g. by making higher education institutions fully responsible for the quality and standards of all degrees that they issue, including joint degrees. In that case, a single evaluation or accreditation of a (joint) study programme would suffice as the institution is also to vouch for the education taking place in partner institutions abroad.

5.4.3 Reception of Dutch higher education abroad

Views on Dutch higher education in surrounding countries and some important comparators (Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom) are positive. The Dutch bachelors and masters are received at the appropriate levels, although experience with the new bachelor–master degrees is still limited. Thus, trust at this moment is still largely based on the usually positive experiences with ‘old-style’ degrees (including those of hbo institutions).

The distinction between hbo and university degrees is not always understood completely and almost invariably given less importance than within the Netherlands. Notwithstanding information by Nuffic etc., higher education institutions and employers abroad often interpret the Dutch binary structure as more or less the same as the national distinctions, in countries that have different sectors in their higher education systems. In countries without binary structures, the distinction is considered rather unimportant. Both for continued study (especially for Ph.D. programmes) and for employment in the private sector, the ultimate decision is with the receiving higher education institution or the receiving employer, and in those decisions as a rule individual *curricula vitae* are considered, not just the higher education degrees.

The standards of Dutch higher education degrees are valued highly abroad; the practical certainty of solid basic quality backed up by what is generally seen as a rigorous accreditation process is a major factor in this trust.

In countries that as a rule have two-year master phases (in our sample: Denmark and Germany), the Dutch one-year master programmes are deemed too short to give the necessary competences to graduates. This is sometimes a negative factor in the recognition of Dutch higher Education abroad and it is one of the main factors making joint degree programme development with foreign higher education institutions difficult.

5.4.4 Conditions for mobility to and from the Netherlands

In Denmark and Sweden, legislation for joint degrees was not yet in place, making engagement in joint programmes problematic also from their side. Other legal barriers include different academic calendars, complexities of student grant systems, but also issues of titles and degrees for hbo institutions (e.g. in cooperation with German *Fachhochschulen*). Beyond those highly important formalities, cooperation with Dutch higher education and higher education institutions was usually judged to be among

the easiest in Europe. The large offer of courses and study programmes in English at Dutch higher education institutions is a factor of importance in this respect.

The English proficiency of Dutch higher education staff and students is valued highly in international comparison.

The rise of mobility figures aimed for in the Bologna Declaration did not show yet. Strengthening the position of the bachelor degree as a 'full-fledged' higher education degree would assist in making labour-market mobility with a bachelor degree a better-accepted option in the eyes of graduates.

5.4.5 Dutch students' competences for the European Higher Education Area

Judgements about strengths and weaknesses of the typical Dutch students (or stereotypes?) include that they are proficient in English, and have an international outlook. Yet they have a less serious attitude towards studying.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Abbreviations

CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
DS	Diploma Supplement: a document issued with each higher education diploma explaining the place of the degree in the Dutch higher education system, of the grades given, etc.
EC	European Credits: workload indicator of higher education courses and modules in line with the ECTS. An academic year consists of 60 EC, throughout all countries in the Bologna process. This implies that the workload per EC may be different across countries. The recommended range is 25-30 working hours per EC.
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area: the intended outcome of the Bologna process by 2010.
hbo	The higher education sector of 'universities of applied science', ' <i>hoger beroepsonderwijs</i> '.
NVAO	Netherlands-Flanders Accreditation Organisation
OCW	Education, Culture and Science (Ministry responsible for higher education)
VSNU	Association of Dutch Universities

Appendix 2 Interviews

The Netherlands

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Christiaan van den Berg, VSNU
Erwin van Braam, hbo-Raad
Ms. De Bruin, Nuffic
Mark Frederiks, NVAO
Peter Froling, Inspectie van het Onderwijs
Fabienne Hendricks, Bestuur ISO
Leendert Klaassen, NVAO
Marlies Leegwater, Ministry OCW
Chiel Renique, VNO-NCW
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International experts

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Appendix 3 International Expert Panel

Prof.Dr. Marijk van der Wende (chair), professor and dean, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Dr. Sybille Reichert, Director, Reichert Consulting, Zürich, Switzerland

Dr. Jim Allen, researcher, Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), Universiteit Maastricht, the Netherlands

Nick Harris, Director – Development and Enhancement, QAA, Bristol, United Kingdom

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