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**Questionnaire on the positions of education councils regarding the Corona Crisis – The Netherlands**

1. **Policy issues**

Describe the main policy issues regarding the COVID 19 education policy

* Which were the main measures adopted during the lockdown (particularly those measures related to teaching and learning), Specify if relevant the education level concerned e.g. primary, vocational, higher education, special needs, others, …
* What were the main pitfalls to overcome? e.g. continuing education activities, impact on learning outcomes, inequalities, infrastructure, impact on wellbeing of pupils (psychological, social, … )

Describe the ‘normalisation’ process

* Which were the main measures adopted during the normalisation process (particularly those measures related to teaching and learning)? Specify if relevant the education level concerned e.g. primary, vocational, higher education, special needs, others, …
* What were the main pitfalls to overcome ? e.g. continuing education activities, impact on learning outcomes, inequalities, infrastructure …
* Early March, several research universities and universities of applied sciences started to cancel lectures and other educational activities. On 12 March, the government decided to cancel all academic education that requires physical attendance. Shortly afterwards, the higher education institutions closed their campuses/buildings.[[1]](#footnote-2)
* Schools (primary, secondary, special needs, VET) closed on March 15; not on the advice of the National Institute for Public Health, but on account of tremendous pressure from teachers (after a plea from an association of medical experts to close schools). Schools were still open for children from health care professionals and people in other critical lines of work, and for school exams. Many schools also provided day care or support for pupils in vulnerable home situations. Schools continued their teaching to the best of their possibilities via distance learning (combinations of on line/digital sessions and assignments that were sent to pupils or that had to be picked up once a week or so at school).Some schools transferred their complete planned programs to distance learning; others focused on repetition of subject matters already covered or re-arranged their programs to cover subjects matters in the period of distance learning that work best, while postponing other subjects matters to post lockdown teaching in school.
* In primary education the final test that aids in advising pupils on what kind of secondary education fits them best, was cancelled. National exams in secondary education were cancelled. Diplomas have been granted on the basis of school exams (most of which had already been administered prior to the pandemic; the remaining school exams have been administered in halls adjusted to meet health security guidelines. Special resits were organized. Exam candidates in secondary special needs education had to take exams administered by the National Board of Tests and Examinations, since their schools lacked a license to administer exams. Exams in VET and higher education have been continued as much as possible. Some have been administered on line or at other locations than school.
* As to apprenticeships and hybrid forms of vocational training (partly in company / on-the-job training) the situation differed extensively, depending on the pandemic’s consequences for the sector concerned. A lot of students were unable to finish or start their apprenticeship or were unable to continue their on the job vocational training since companies were in lockdown.
* Reopening was done gradually. Decisions were based on:
  + Medical advice (from National Institute for Public Health)
  + Effect on pupils (educational and social/emotional)
  + Effect on the economy (e.g. effect on working parents)
  + Practicability for schools and effect on public space/transport
* On May 11, schools in special needs education re-opened for 100%; primary schools re-opened for 50% of the week. The guideline was: half the pupils on one day, the other half the other. However, schools could decide for themselves and some deviated from the guidelines (half the pupils in the morning, the other half in the afternoon). Pupils had to observe 1.5m distance from teachers as much as possible, and adults among themselves. Hygiene requirements were imposed (people with symptoms staying at home, regular hand washing etc.), but no face masks (teachers were allowed to use them if they wanted).
* On June 8, primary schools opened for 100%, under the same requirements.
* On June 1, secondary schools and schools for secondary special needs education reopened, for as much as they could manage given the requirement that pupils and teachers all observed 1.5m distance. In practice that meant that pupils had 25-30 percent of their lessons. Some schools decided to remain closed until the end of summer break.
* As of 15 June, VET and higher education had a limited reopening. Under strict conditions, practical lessons/training and tests in school / on campus were allowed again. Students and staff should observe 1.5m distance. Activities had to be planned between 11AM and 3PM or after 8PM. All other education activities had to be organized by means of distance learning. In general, distance learning continued in VET and higher education.
* As of July 1, the 1.5m distance between pupils is no longer needed, and starting the new school year secondary schools reopened for 100%. Teachers have to maintain a 1.5m distance from pupils and each other, unless this is really not possible due to the nature of the teaching activities (e.g. practical instruction/classes in preparatory vocational education or teaching pupils with special needs).
* After the summer break, VET and higher education has partially re-opened. With the start of the new school/academic year, VET-institutions and higher education institutions are allowed to organize other educational activities on location (for small groups of students) as well; provided that the school/university applies with national health guidelines, and with general agreements in respect to the use of public transport. Students are asked to avoid public transport if possible. The time restrictions have been lifted. Timetables have been adjusted. Classes and lectures are spread across the week (with different begin and end times) to avoid bulks of students making use of public transport facilities. Schools/universities are at liberty to do this in a way that suits their situation. Students and teachers/instructors should maintain a distance of 1.5 meters between them. A considerable part of education/teaching in VET and higher education is still in digital form. Exact measures vary among schools/universities and regions of the country.

Study programs work with compulsory study advices (if a student does need meet the requirements the admission is terminated). Students that did not manage to meet the requirements due to the pandemic, have been granted an additional year to do so. The exact way differs among schools/universities.

VET-institutions are not obliged to record student absence if a student needs to remain in quarantine. The government calls upon VET-institutions to discuss possibilities for distance learning with parents and students in case a student has to remain in quarantine.

* Schools had/have to comply with general hygiene measures; e.g. keep distance (if possible), wash your hands regularly, stay at home if you or one of the people you live with, have symptoms, avoid busy places (for schools: try to avoid crowds in or around school buildings), avoid public transport if possible, for everyone over 12 years’ old: maintain quarantine after visiting high risk areas abroad. No face masks are required, but some schools decided to use them. Protocols for operating schools under the various requirements were published and updated by the association of universities / school board associations and the teacher unions. Schools decide on specific measures (e.g. arrangement of classrooms, routing in school buildings, time tables, whether pupils move from one classroom to another or not; parents not entering the school building to drop off or pick up their children) themselves, so they can adapt measures to local circumstances. Schools and universities are in close contact with regional health and safety authorities During the summer break, concerns arose about the role of ventilation in (preventing) virus transmission. The Ministry established a coordination team to assist schools in checking their ventilation systems and fix them if necessary.
* Within weeks after the start of the lockdown there were initiatives to share knowledge and experiences at various levels; from small digital communities or platforms for individual teachers to special websites hosted by the school board associations or research institutes. The National Coordination Office for Educational Research assembled research findings e.g. on distance learning on a special website.
* The Inspectorate initiated monitors to keep track of what schools were doing. Supervision of whether schools met the statutory teaching time requirements was discontinued. Schools were not required to account for effective teaching time. Enforcement of compulsory education was interrupted as well. By now it applies again (pupils are expected to partake in school activities / attend lessons in school), unless they have to observe quarantine due to symptoms or visits to high risk areas abroad. Schools did not have to take record of (digital) attendance.
* Learning loss resulting from school closures is addressed at the school level. The government made subsidies available; inter alia for organizing summer schools and for specific measures within schools. The government also made subsidies available to maintain apprenticeships and on-the-job-training positions. The government made funds available to compensate students in VET or higher education financially if their graduation was delayed due to corona measures (e.g. partial refund tuition fee); or to offer additional support for students. In sum, the government has made 500 million euro available for subsidies and compensation, so far.
* Statutory deadlines for applying for admission to VET schools (1 April) or higher education (1 May) were extended by a month.
* VET students who haven’t managed to graduate in due time, can start their subsequent study programs in higher (professional) education anyway on the condition that they graduate in VET within the year. The same goes for students in higher education; they can start a master’s program even though they haven’t completed their bachelor’s program yet (on the same condition).
* The government has made it clear that it has no intention to initiate another general/national lockdown. In the new academic year, measures will be taken locally or regionally if necessary. That may include a local or regional lockdown.
* Introduction activities for new students in VET and higher education have been transferred to digital media as far as possible. Activities on location are only allowed if they are of an informative nature – e.g. directly related to preparations for lessons (hence: no social events, parties, no alcohol, no events post 22.00) – and only in small groups. Student organizations are only allowed to host introduction events with the permission of the VET institutions (and all previous conditions apply).
* Pitfalls during the period of lock down
  + Not all pupils and students had an internet connection or necessary devices at home. In a joint effort of schools and municipalities – with support from the Ministry – these connections and devices have been provided for as soon as possible.
  + There were concerns about pupils – mainly in socially vulnerable environments – that did not partake in distance learning activities. Initially, there was a considerable number of pupils that schools lost contact with altogether. Joint efforts by schools and municipalities reduced that number quickly to several hundreds of pupils; most of them are likely to be children of migratory workers that returned to their home countries.
  + Distance learning may be suitable for knowledge transfer and the like, but it does hinder the social function of going to school together and the pedagogical relationship between pupils and teacher.
  + In higher education, there were issues with examinations. Several exams were administered on line / at a distance. To prevent fraud, several measures were taken that raised privacy concerns.
  + Schools differed widely in the way and how fast they managed to get distance level functioning at a proper level.
  + Distance learning turned out not to be suitable for specific types of education; e.g. for very young children / early childhood education or for practical forms of teaching.
  + Discontinuation of apprenticeships and on-the-job training positions.
  + Concerns about international students: social isolation of the ones present in the Netherlands & concerns about applications for the new academic year (and the consequences for the financial position of higher education institutions if international students would decide not to come to study in the Netherlands).

Current issues:

* Schools and teachers have to deal with much larger differences between students than before. Some students have excelled during the lock down whereas many others have not made much progress in their school subjects. This calls for differentiation skills of teachers. Students with favourable home situations (highly educated parents with a lot of time on their hands and interest in their children’s education) have encountered fewer problems than children from less favourable backgrounds.
* Differences between schools have become larger. Some schools have been able to offer quality distance education whereas other schools have hardly succeeded in offering their students the minimum.
* quarantine measures for teachers with symptoms and delays in tests.
* Having to deal with / find a balance between health concerns of staff and parents on the one hand and the importance of continuing education (in school / as a group activity) as much as possible.

What were the main innovations that opened new opportunities for renewal in education policies? Are there any lessons learned for new approaches in education (e.g. added value of blended learning, blended counseling of pupils, …)?

What was the role played by distance learning? Blended learning? What are the lessons learned by these innovations?

It is too early to draw conclusions on lessons learned. In general, impressive and swift transition to distance learning has been made. It is likely that the pandemic will accelerate digitalization of education, the change to blended learning etc.

One lesson learned is that school is very important in the lives of children and students. The structure of the school day, the connection between pupils and between pupils and their teachers is severely frustrated if only digital means are available.

1. **Positions and recommendations of education councils**

* Did your Council release recommendations on education in pandemic times? Or are recommendations planned? In progress?

Yes.

* What is the main focus of those recommendations?
* What are the most relevant recommendations produced by your Education Council?

Upon the request of the Ministry, the Council had issued two pandemic related advisory reports this spring.

The first one (16 April) was solicited and published within weeks after the school lockdown was initiated.[[2]](#footnote-3) It deals with addressing the short-term consequences of the lockdown for primary and secondary education. The main issues and recommendations are:

* the position of children in vulnerable positions: the Council emphasizes the significance of proper attention to children in vulnerable positions, especially children living in instable or unsafe environments. Municipalities and schools should stay in contact with those pupils; if necessary providing day-care shelter in schools or elsewhere on the same basis as is done for children of people in crucial professions (e.g. nurses). Schools should be supported to provide for these children by deploying professionals that are inactive due to the lockdown (e.g. educational staff of museums). If the lockdown would exceed the duration of a few weeks, special activities should be organized for these pupils embedded in extended school days.
* intelligent ways of re-opening schools: the Council observes that it is very likely that many children will not have covered or processed all subject matters in the way they should have. However, huge variation between pupils is likely; due to differences in learning styles / capability of working on your own versus need of frequent direction, due to social economic factors, due to differences in whether a particular form of education/teaching can be adapted to distance learning (e.g. early childhood education, VET). Some may even have done better. If the lockdown (i.e. the period in which pupils learn at home, directed at the distance by their school/teachers) does not exceed the duration of a few weeks, deficits will be limited, in general. Schools and pupils will probably be able to catch up deficits quickly, within the next academic year(s). Schools can be trusted to manage this situation, although some support would be welcome. Special attention would be needed to pupils making the transition to secondary or higher education. If the lock down would last for several months, additional measures would be called for. The Council stresses that measures should not focus completely on learning outcomes, but also on the social and emotional development of pupils.
* research and collection and dissemination of relevant information. The Council recommends building a national node to collect information and access to support possibilities for schools. It also recommends to initiate research to monitor consequences and the effectiveness of measures.

The second one (9 June) deals with long term consequences and approaches, i.e. the start of the new academic year and beyond. It covers all segments of the education systems, sketches a way to conduct educational policies in these extraordinary times (e.g. based on learning within policy arena’s and schools from current initiatives and experiences, scenarios based, considering various interests and perspectives and acknowledging that this crisis causes new forms of scarcity). It also offers an agenda for policies and investments in education drawing on the observation that this crisis augments existing long-term challenges such as shortages of teachers, equal opportunities, reading skills, connections to the labour market and life-long learning. The Council also emphasises that this crisis clearly brings to the fore that schools and universities also have a social function, as well as that this crisis raises issues with the functions of tests and exams, especially on transitions from one step in the education system to another. The main recommendation is to invest in education and to provide young people with good prospects for the future.[[3]](#footnote-4)

At the moment, the Council is not working on further specific corona related recommendations. However, in all of the projects at hand the corona-situation will be taken into account (for example: the Council is currently preparing an advise report regarding ‘public and private in education’. The growth of private parties and public-private cooperation in education due to corona will be discussed in this report.)

In the Council’s work program for 2021 time and capacity have been reserved for additional advisory reports if changing circumstances call for further advice. In 2021, the Council will also work on a survey of chances and challenges of new technology for education processes. The experience with digital methods and distance teaching gained during the lockdown will be part of this survey.

In addition, the Council participates – by means of its President, and several staff members – in the ad hoc national think thank for economic matters related to the corona crisis. This think thank is composed of representatives from various advisory councils as well as trade unions, business, government research institutes/policy analysis bureaus, the National Bank, and the Association of Dutch Municipalities. By the end of May, this think thank has issued a brief with general recommendations and a general view of the economic situation. Thereupon, it works on briefs addressing specific issues. The Education Council is involved in preparing a brief on life-long learning.

1. For more detailed information on research universities, see https://vsnu.nl/en\_GB/news-items.html/nieuwsbericht/569-maatregelen-bij-universiteiten-door-corona , [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/adviezen/publicaties/adviezen/2020/04/16/gevolgen-coronamaatregelen> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/adviezen/publicaties/adviezen/2020/06/09/advies-vooruitzien-voor-jonge-generaties> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)