

Serving public interests

16 April 2013

The division of responsibilities in higher education in the Netherlands is rather intricate. The government requires assurances that education providers operate within the legal framework. Children and their parents, participants and students must be able to trust their school or study programme to provide a quality education. However, the responsibility for individual education institutions lies with their own governing bodies. The Education Council concludes that the social legitimacy of the governing bodies of education institutions has come under pressure as a result of deregulation, increasing autonomy as well as a number of controversial incidents. In this advisory report, the Education Council emphasises that the Minister can only provide an assurance of the public interests of education if those interests are also fostered by the governing bodies of education institutions.

The Education Council regards governing bodies of education institutions as essential linchpins of governance relationships. It is the responsibility of educational governing bodies to translate the world of politics to the world of professional practice for schools and study programmes, and vice versa. Educational governing bodies also have a specific responsibility to connect the inner world of education with the world outside of education. The Education Council believes that the call for more regulation or a return to centralised control would not offer a solution to the problems that have arisen. Too much control and supervision by government would not do full justice to pluriformity, as it might hamper the quality improvement process, hinder innovation and lead to a lack of trust. Too much autonomy for institutions, however, could lead to risks of public interests being neglected and public funds being wasted. It is important to strike a balance in the governance relationships between education institutions and government.

The Education Council takes the view that 'good governance' is possible within the present governance model and with the current rules. Changes to the governance model are not necessary and, at the present time, actually undesirable. The Education Council wishes to focus attention on better application of the model in practice, and calls for a strengthening of the governance capabilities of education institutions and for the professional development of educational governing bodies. In the Educational Council's view, sustainable governance relationships and quality improvements in education will also benefit from a targeted deployment of various forms of supervision and accountability.

Recommendation 1: strengthen governance capabilities

The Education Council believes that the governance capabilities of institutions could be improved by describing the expertise of governors and internal supervisors, and by including this in governance codes for the various sectors. There is a role here for the sector organisations. The Education Council also calls for the normative component of good governance to be included in the codes: integrity and modesty, awareness of the public interest and engaging in dialogue that includes sufficient opposition. Correct procedures and conduct are especially important for governing bodies to acquire (or lose) legitimacy

Recommendation 2: improve the role of the Inspectorate in quality improvement

The government and education governing bodies share responsibility for the quality of education. By pursuing risk-focused supervision, the government has concentrated on minimum standards. The drive towards further quality improvements should take advantage of the quality-improving role of the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate can compare schools and therefore provide them with feedback. The Education Council believes that forms of 'accountability' are more appropriate than forms of supervision when quality improvements have to go beyond basic quality. Accountability is aimed at learning lessons and improving. Interaction and exchanges of what is being done well and what is not (and why not) is an essential part of this.