

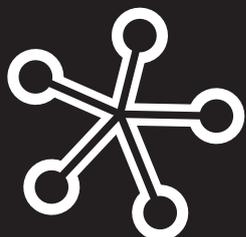


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**Education, Inequality, and  
Active Citizenship**  
Tensions in a Differentiated  
Schooling System

*Herman G. van de Werfhorst*

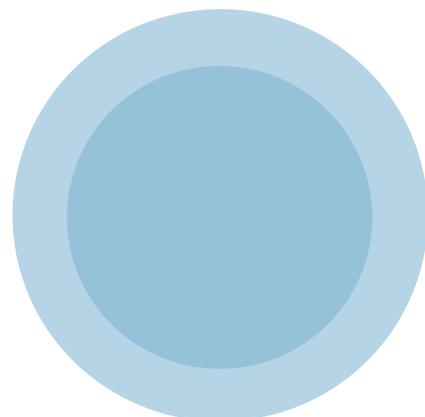
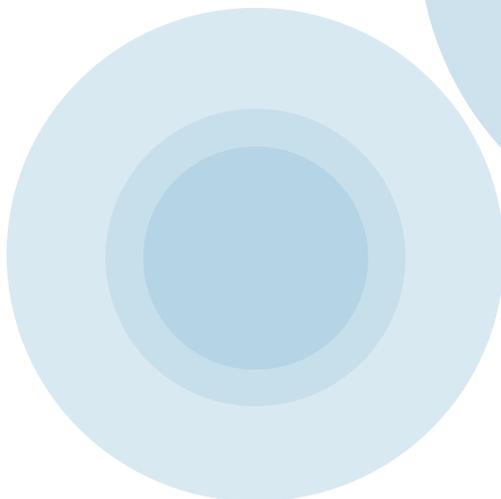
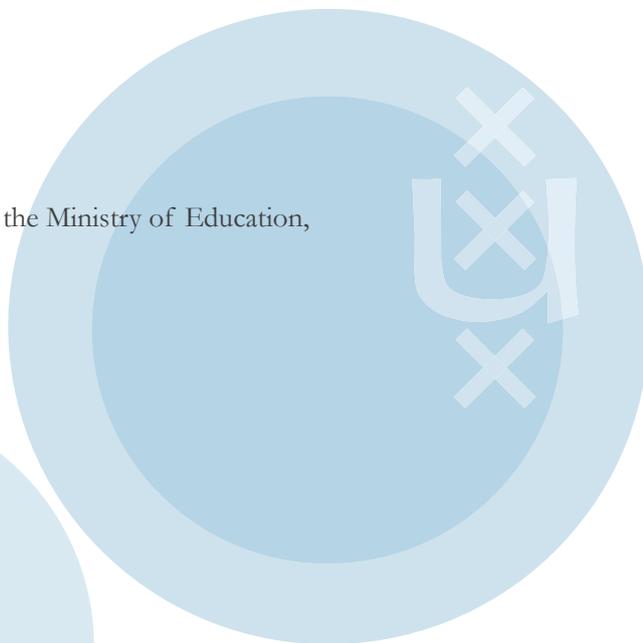


Working Paper 09-73

February 2009

## Acknowledgement:

This essay is prepared for the Directie Kennis of the Ministry of Education,  
Culture and Sciences.



February 2009

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Please address correspondence to:  
Prof.dr. H.G. van de Werfhorst  
University of Amsterdam, Department of Sociology  
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 185  
1012 DK Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

By email [h.g.vandewerfhorst@uva.nl](mailto:h.g.vandewerfhorst@uva.nl).

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# **Education, Inequality, and Active Citizenship**

## **Tensions in a Differentiated Schooling System**

**Herman G. van de Werfhorst**

**Professor of Sociology**

*Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies,  
University of Amsterdam*

**WP 09/73**



# Abstract

In this essay I analyze the problems that differentiated educational systems, like the Dutch, face in preparing youth for contemporary society. I discuss the implications of three broad societal trends for education: a changing labour market, an increasing call for selection and excellence, and increasing diversity and individualization. The implications of these trends are examined for what I see as the four central tasks of education: to prepare for the labour market, to select and sort students efficiently on the basis of their capacities and interests, to promote equality of opportunity, and to prepare for active citizenship. I conclude with a description of the cheers and challenges of the Dutch educational system, leading to recommendations for Dutch educational policy.



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# 1. Introduction

The two most important questions concerning the role of education in society are: what should education do? And: does it do that well?

Maybe the answer to the first question is more stable across time than the answer to the second. At a general level the tasks of education are to a large degree independent of the context in which people are educated. For example, education should, as one task, prepare for the labour market, which has been a central goal of educational institutions for more than a century. Yet, given the normative character of the question what education should do, the central goals of education may change when norms change. At the onset of formal education, for instance, the labour market task was not in the picture. Literacy skills were not (primarily) aimed at creating an educated work force, but first served religious purposes and later helped in socializing the elites into the right social circles, where reading and understanding Latin were important forms of learning.

At a general level the central tasks of education are rather stable across time, as we will see below. However, the answer to the question whether a particular educational system does well in realizing those tasks is much more dependent on the context in which people are educated, or in other words, on the society in which youngsters integrate. Preparing for the labour market, to take the same example, needs different skills now than before. Hence, it is relevant to examine the consequences of societal change on the demands we put on the educational system, and evaluate whether our educational institutions live up to their central tasks in a changing society.

In this essay I shall first highlight what I see as the four central tasks of education. Then, I will discuss three societal developments that change the demands to our educational institutions, for better or for worse. Finally, I will summarize what I see as the big challenges for the Dutch educational system given all these patterns, and then provide directions of how to organize our educational system in a more adequate way to deal with societal changes.

The three societal developments are:

1. *The changing labour market.* Does our educational system prepare well enough for the current demands on the labour market? Three issues are at stake here. First we need to evaluate whether our educational institutions produce the knowledge and skills that are currently desired by employers. Second, the issue is whether it is at all feasible that education produces these knowl-

edge and skills, or that perhaps other institutions are more efficient in this (such as the family or labour agreements). Third, what are the implications for inequality of opportunity if the changing occupational structure favors children from the middle classes more strongly than working class children?

2. *Call for selection and excellence.* As a consequence of educational expansion, institutions for higher education are increasingly building forms of selection and diversification into the system. Examples in universities are honours programmes, University Colleges, and research masters. How do these developments relate to inequality of educational opportunity? To understand this we need to understand processes of educational choice better than we do today. Following sociological theories of educational decision making, I will focus on selection per sé, and on differentiation of tuition fees often related to selection.
3. *Increasing diversity and individualization.* At all levels of education the target group has increasingly diversified in terms of ethnic origin. At the same time, through increased individualization people's opinions and behaviour may be less strongly influenced by institutions and structures such as the family, religion, and social class. What are the implications of such a diversified and individualized society for the central tasks of education? In particular the implications for the task of citizenship education are discussed, for two reasons. First, increased diversification may call for more open, 'cosmopolitan' forms of citizenship education, and second, increased individualization may put an extra burden on schools to teach the kinds of citizenship skills and knowledge that we deem important for every member of society.

## 2. Four central tasks of education

In my view education has four central tasks in contemporary societies (see also Peschar & Wesselingh 1999; Borghans et al. 2008). First, education should prepare for the labour market (the labour market task). This task implies that education teaches skills that are productive for work, and thereby helps school leavers in optimizing their labour market opportunities, and employers in optimizing their production.

The second task is that education should efficiently sort students according to their talents and interests (the efficiency task). Students are not equally equipped with different sorts of talents, and have different interests in different kinds of work and lives. Education can help to sort students in finding their destinations. The educational system should sort students so that those with a high level of learning ability have the opportunity to reach higher levels of schooling than those with lower levels of learning ability, and that those with other talents get the chance to optimize their opportunities in the domains more closely matching their attributes. The efficiency task implies that efficient learning is created when the matching process is optimized. The ‘total’ production of knowledge and skills is then optimized (given a particular budget for education).

The third central task of schooling is that education should provide equal opportunities to children of different backgrounds (the equal opportunities task). Given the pivotal role of education in shaping individuals’ lives, a society that strives for equal opportunities for all its citizens should focus centrally on education in realizing this. Equality of opportunity should be distinguished from equality of position. Equality of position refers to equality in terms of distributions. A particular (for example income) distribution may be more equal than another, because the dispersion is lower. Equality of opportunities does not refer to the distribution per sé, but rather to the chances that different people have to obtain a particular position in the distribution. An equal distribution in terms of dispersion may be unequal in terms of opportunities (e.g. when the dispersion in earnings is low but one’s position in the distribution is strongly determined by his or her social background), and an equal opportunities distribution may be unequal when it comes to dispersion. However, according to some there is a clear linkage between the two, for two reasons. First, theoretically the two conceptions of equality are hard to separate. Inequality of position can be directly linked to inequality of opportunities, as large inequalities lead to strong differences in children’s chances in education (Breen

& Jonsson 2007; Swift 2001). Also, one could maintain that equality of educational opportunities is promoted if equality of position is granted at earlier stages in the educational career. Second, empirically it appears that equal societies in terms of dispersions are also more equal in terms of opportunities (Kenworthy 2008).

The fourth central task of educational institutions is to create citizens that are actively involved in society (the active citizenship task). In other words, education should contribute to active citizenship. The formation of active citizenship can not be fully delegated to the responsibility of private caregivers. Schooling should have an active role in it, as it can help to create equality in civic competences. Civic partially overlap with the skills wanted for the labour market (first task). For instance, general cognitive skills contribute to labour market productivity and to being informed about politics and thereby to political participation. But partly civic skills are typically taught in educational curricula specifically devoted to knowledge about politics, about formal institutions, and about current affairs.

Within a given educational institutional structure, some of these four tasks may be more easily met than others. A system that optimizes on efficient learning may, for example perform less well when it comes to equality of opportunity (Brunello & Checchi 2007). This implies that, in the design of educational institutions, governments have to face policy trade-offs when a particular institution serves one task but harms another.

Another trade-off is that between labour market preparation and equality of opportunity. It is well-known that a strong vocational educational sector helps youngsters in the transition process from the educational system to the workplace. For instance, youth unemployment is lower in countries with a strong vocational sector (Breen 2005). Yet, there still is a significant social class effect on choice for vocational versus generic types of schooling. If people enrolled in vocational secondary programmes (such as MBO in the Netherlands) have fewer opportunities to enrol in tertiary education, strongly vocationally oriented systems may enlarge social class differences in the attainment of a tertiary-level degree.

A less well-known trade-off is between the task of labour market preparation and citizenship education. It may be that educational systems that perform well in the preparation for the labour market perform worse when it comes to the citizenship task of schooling. This could be the case if early selection in the educational system, and a strong vocational orientation, both lead to improved

labour market signalling but at the same time increase variation in citizenship competences. A well-known view on social justice is that principles of justice depend on the domain of life we are looking at (Walzer 1983; Miller 1999). I subscribe to the view that the equality principle should be governing in issues related to politics, and the merit principle should be governing in the labour market (Miller 1999). We then easily see that educational systems are precisely functioning on the crossroads of these principles. Schooling should aim at both increasing the visibility of the merits/skills obtained, which is promoted by diversification, tracking and vocational orientation, and at equalizing the kinds of knowledge and skills that promote democratic equality. I will go into this trade-off more extensively below, as it is an unnoticed trade-off in current thinking of educational design.



## 3. Three societal trends and their implications

### 3.1. Changing labour markets

The first development that poses challenges to the educational system is the changing labour market. Two changes are important here: the changing occupational structure and increasing demand for skill updating through technological developments and flexibilization.

First the changing occupational structure. In the 20th century, there has been a pattern of decline of the primary industries (agriculture, fishing, etc), a growth and later decline of the secondary sector of industry and manufacturing, and a steady growth of tertiary and quaternary sectors (private and public service sectors, respectively). Looking at the social class structure we see, for example, a decline of the size of the class of self-employed farmers. In the 1970s farmers formed 8.6 percent of male workers in eleven European countries, whereas this has declined to 4 percent in the 1990s. For the Netherlands this trend has been from 6 percent to slightly over 2 percent. The class of professionals and managers has grown from 23 to 31 percent in Europe, and in the Netherlands from 31 to 46 percent (Breen 2004; Ganzeboom & Luijckx 2004). The manual working classes have been in decline in the Netherlands. These changes in the occupational structure may pose serious challenges on what we teach in schools. Does our educational system prepare students well enough for the changing occupational structure?

But not only the class structure has changed. Also within occupations there are developments in the labour market that may have profound effects on the kinds of skills and knowledge we need to teach to students. In particular, though technological developments it is said that the skills of the workforce needs more updating during the employment career than before (De Grip et al. 2002). Skills have the risk to become obsolete, because technological developments have changed the job tasks. Moreover, the increasing flexibility in labour contracts puts demands on the ability of individuals to work at different organizations, certainly in periods of economic recessions as we see now. The developments in the Dutch MBO schools (Regionale Opleidings Centra, ROC's) towards

competence-based learning originates from the declining stability (and increasing flexibility) of the skills we need. It is no longer sufficient to learn specific knowledge and skills on vocational subjects. Rather we should equip students with general skills and work attitudes that make them more likely to be able to develop new skills once they have enrolled the labour force. We need to prepare workers for a career full of life-long learning, where the continuous updating of skills is needed for changing occupations and mobility across organizations.

In relation to this is the increasing importance that is attached to ‘soft skills’ in addition to cognitive skills for successful employment. There are three different views on the importance of soft skills. First, in line with the life-long learning perspective mentioned above, by providing workers with particular work attitudes and competencies, their ability is improved to avoid skill obsolescence through skill updating. In other words, soft skills have become more important across the occupational structure. Second, there is a field that stresses that these non-cognitive skills have always been important; only neo-classical labour economists have failed to see this because their model of education is principally oriented towards cognitive skills (Bowles & Gintis 1976; 2002). Then there is a third view that stresses that soft skills are more relevant for some occupations than for other. Moreover, the growing sectors of employment are precisely those sectors with ‘people processing occupations’ where soft skills are required (Jackson 2007; Jackson et al. 2005; Breen & Goldthorpe 2001).

Independent of these views, it is clear that employers do not only have a particular interest in cognitive skills, but also in social skills and certain kinds of personality. If employers are asked about the kinds of skills that their employees lack most, they more often refer to social and personal skills than to technical skills.

### **3.2. Implications of changing labour markets**

The first implication of both labour market changes (changing occupational structure and increasing desire for skill updating) concerns the balance between specific/vocational and generic skills (Van der Velden 2006). More generic skills are needed. Teaching vocational skills may be less relevant in a rapidly changing economy, as vocational skills may be quickly outdated. Employers need skills that allow for flexible acquisition of new skills, which are typically generic in nature. Moreover, the growing sectors of employment are in various kinds of services where vocational skills are less need-

ed, and the contracting sectors are the ones where vocational skills were traditionally more important (skilled manual work).

The vocational sector is quite strong in the Netherlands, and in my opinion we should adhere to a strong vocational component in vocational schools at upper secondary (MBO) and tertiary level (HBO). Through the vocational orientation of the Dutch schooling system there is a clear transparency of the skills that are acquired in educational programmes. There is a clearly demarcated labour market where employers have influence on the curriculum. The big challenge is how to organize vocational programmes so that they effectively deal with these changes (Blossfeld 1992). Employers' influence will contribute to 'devotionalize' the vocational programmes, as it is in their interest to create a workforce that acquires more generic competences that help to avoid skills obsolescence. The biggest skills shortage that employers see in their workforce does not concern occupationally relevant/technical skills, but rather general and social skills, and personality, as many studies have shown. Indeed, the competence oriented learning model currently entering the MBO curricula is heavily influenced by employers' organizations.

However, focusing too strongly on those skills would make vocational programmes perhaps too general. The question would then be what distinguishes vocational schools from general education. If the overlap between vocational and general education gets too strong, employers may increasingly prefer graduates from general education, which in turn may make vocational programmes a less attractive option for students of middle class backgrounds. This may increase social inequality of educational choices (in terms of vocational or general track). As a consequence of this, people educated in vocational programmes will become more strongly negatively selected (particularly with regard to those soft skills learned at home). This does not only affect their relative position on the labour market, but can also lead to behavioral changes of employers against people educated in vocational education. The big challenge is how Dutch vocational education deals with the paradoxical situation of making vocational education more general and at the same time maintain its distinctive character. As Van der Velden (2006) argues, generic skills can only contribute to efficient learning if they are

contextualized in a vocational setting, and cannot compensate for a lack of specific skills. This implies that there is not a trade-off between generic and specific skills.

A rather neglected but highly relevant second implication is that there may evolve a greater demand for soft skills that are not primarily learned in school, but rather originate from the social class of origin (see Jackson 2007; Jackson et al. 2005; Goldthorpe 1996). Many services occupations (also in the higher end of the income distribution) require social skills and manners because of the large human interactional component of their duties. Examples are hotel and restaurant managers, and in retail. This trend, if true, would mean that increasing functional matching of jobs to individuals, as implied by the meritocratization thesis, does not automatically imply stronger selection and reward on the basis of education, but could also imply stronger selection and reward on the basis of skills people learn at home. Which, in turn, implies that we can no longer equate meritocratization with a demise of the influence of social class (or ethnic) origin, as merits can no longer be equated with ‘achieved’ characteristics but could also reflect attributes that could be seen as ‘ascribed’ to persons.

The discussion about what can be counted as merits is a difficult one. It has been argued that merit factors could include social skills as long as (a) there is a clear impact on occupational attainment for many social groups, and (b) there is at most a modest relationship between social class and the variable under study (Kingston 2006). But given condition (b) it is very hard to come up with any sound definition of what counts as merit, as even standard indicators of intelligence, effort in schooling are affected by social background to a substantial degree. Independent on whether social and personal skills can be headed under the rubric of merit, it is true that these skills are increasingly relevant for productive reasons; employers reward these skills because they are functional to them.

A third, broader implication of these trends is that the neoclassical economics understanding of education and skills may lose ground. The reasons why education pays off on the labour market may increasingly be in line with alternative theories, that have been proposed since the 1970s, but have reappeared more recently (Bowles et al. 2001; Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). In particular, education may not only indicate productive skills as argued in neoclassical economics (in the direct sense proposed by human capital theory, or in the indirect sense in terms of signalling/screening on earlier ability), but also indicates other personal attributes. The question is, then, how we can organize our educational institutions in such a way that we equip our students with skills, knowledge and compe-

tencies that deal with the changing labour market demands, even in contexts where education should produce more than general cognitive skills.

A fourth implication of changing labour markets results from the views of Wolf (2002) and Wolff (2006). Wolff (2006) shows for the United States that the empirical relationship between education and economic growth is ambiguous. Wolf (2002) argues something similar for Britain, concluding that education mainly sorts students on the abilities they already had before entering schooling. She furthermore develops a provocative viewpoint, and argues that the tax payers are paying for education whereas the employers benefit from it as a device to select on the basis of ability (a screening device). Why should we spend so much tax money on increasing the signal of workers, which employers could achieve with their own efforts if they were forced to? Given the need for continuous updating of skills, Wolf's view may become more relevant, as education is decreasingly able to provide skills that are productive for a whole career. Yet, I don't agree with the viewpoint that we should put the responsibility of education and signalling to employers. Under this view there is no control at all for equality of opportunity, and education should provide more kinds of skills than just those relevant for labour.

### **3.3. Call for selection and excellence**

A second trend that affects education in contemporary society is the increasing demand for selection and excellence within educational levels. Most clearly this can be seen in universities. Although Dutch universities can hardly be ranked in terms of quality due to rather uniform funding, within universities different forms of selection have been implemented. Many bachelor programmes now offer an honours class for their best students, which usually comprises of additional course offerings to students with good grades in the first year. Study progress is monitored more effectively, so that advice (or coercion) can be given to malperforming students to drop out of the programme. Some universities have set up university colleges which are highly selective and offer broad bachelor programmes in science or humanities. At the Master level there is an increasing number of selective master programmes alongside master programmes for whom graduates from at least one bachelor degree are always eligible. One such selective type of master programmes concerns the two-year

(rather than one-year) Research Master programmes set up in close connection to research institutes and research schools.

Not only at the university level, but also at the HBO (vocational college) level, selection and excellence are now more often implemented than in the past. HBO colleges offer master degrees, and some have even started up PhD programmes in collaboration with (mostly foreign) universities.

Where does this increasing emphasis on selection and excellence come from? One important explanation for the emergence of the discourse of selection and excellence is educational expansion. Educational expansion plausibly affects credential inflation, when the supply of graduates exceeds the demand. Credential inflation implies, in its turn, that employers need other sources of information to discriminate between applicants. The positional nature of schooling, where not only the amount of skills is relevant, but particularly one's relative position in the pool of applicants, implies that distinctions are sought on top of the already existing distribution. So, if the 'old' educational system had a university degree as the highest possible achievement, in a system where many youngsters enter this level additional diversification is developed above this highest level of education. Hence, variation in selection in master programmes is a logical consequence of educational expansion.

This does not say that employers really need graduates from excellent and selective programmes for the skills they have mastered, implying that they would fare better in comparison with a situation when these same applicants came into the workplace with 'just' a normal university degree from the unselective system. Plausibly the production of skills would be far more efficient if we increased diversification at the lower ranks of higher education. And in fact this is what has been done in the Netherlands by implementing the Bologna agreement by issuing new university bachelor degrees. Yet, as educational sociologists have long argued, such diversification below the highest standard degree does not lead to such an efficient production because educational decision makers, in their uncertainty, choose for the highest (master) degree even if a bachelor degree would offer the relevant skills. Given that education is a positional good, employers prefer master graduates even for jobs where a bachelor degree would be sufficient. Adding selection on top of the existing structure does not have the same perverse effects.

### 3.4. Implications of the call for selection and excellence

A first implication of an increased emphasis on selection and excellence concerns the dissemination of the logic of excellence to preceding levels of schooling. Will the trend towards more selection in higher education lead to more ambition among secondary school students before graduation? This may partly be expected, as students may increasingly benefit from good performance. If they do well in secondary school, they may also be more likely to be selected for selective programmes. Yet, on the other hand it is uncertain that secondary school students are already concerned with issues of selection after admission to university, certainly when it concerns small programmes catering for few students. Few students will know much about the existence of selective programmes before university enrolment, and if they are it may be particularly students of well-educated backgrounds (see below).

A second implication concerns the issue whether employers pick up the variability in selectivity of programmes. It is likely that employers search for additional selection criteria when they are confronted with a labour force that is educated in mass higher education, certainly if supply exceeds demand (credential inflation). Graduation from a selective programme is likely to function as such an additional source of information to employers.

A third implication concerns the question whether selection can be coupled to differentiation of tuition fees. Is it acceptable (or advisable) if more strongly selective programmes charge higher fees than less selective programmes? The issue of tuition fee differentiation has thus far mostly been discussed from the perspective of the expected gains of selective programmes. If labour market gains are higher from selective programmes than from non-selective programmes, it is legitimate that tuition fees are higher for those programmes. The education is better, with smaller groups, and it is legitimate if the costs of such intensive programmes are partly borne by the beneficiaries. And, as I argued above, it is likely that employers will increasingly rely on additional selection criteria, and graduation from selective programmes is likely to be one such additional source of information to employers.

A more neglected issue concerning tuition fee differentiation is the impact it could have on inequality of educational opportunity. To illustrate the impact of selection within higher education on educational inequality we need to focus on theories of educational decision making. It is difficult to maintain that only meritocratic factors can be allowed to affect educational outcomes, because it is

difficult to define what meritocratic characteristics are (Goldthorpe 1996; Van de Werfhorst 2008b). The argument that only productive capacities may be rewarded is untenable, as there are many productive capacities that are not meritocratic. Another argument that only attributes may be rewarded for which individuals are responsible themselves is also untenable, if only because we are willing to reward intelligence in schools, which is likely to be partly genetic.

Instead of focusing on meritocratic features, it is better to focus on the educational decision making process, to get insight into the factors that explain the level of schooling students of different social and ethnic backgrounds attain, and to think of policy measures that promote equality in this respect. In such explanations two important effects feature: primary effects and secondary effects. Primary effects refer to differences in educational outcomes that result from differences across social classes or ethnic groups in (demonstrated) learning abilities. Children of more advantaged social backgrounds perform better on school tests at a particular point in the educational career, which partly explains more ambitious schooling choices after this point. The secondary effect refers to the effect of social origin on educational choices independent of (or on top of) differences in learning abilities. Even among children of equal learning abilities, children of more advantaged social backgrounds make more ambitious schooling choices than children of lower class backgrounds. Clearly educational inequality is not only a consequence of variations in learning abilities, but also of variations in choices conditional upon learning abilities.

Each of these two effects needs its own explanation. How can we explain that students of different social origins and ethnic groups score differently on standardized school tests? Many theories have been proposed, and in particular theories about different schooling cultures seem appropriate to explain the primary effects. But perhaps more importantly, certainly from an educational policy perspective, is how we can explain the fact that even among students that score equally in school tests, still children of different social classes vary in their educational choices? Cultural theories, that argue that social classes differ with regard to their affinity to the school culture, seem less valuable here. Rather it seems that such secondary effects are better explained from a far more rational perspective

on educational decision making (Breen & Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe 1996; Morgan 2005; Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007).

An important element in choice processes is the information that people have at their disposal about the alternatives in question. It is likely that the amount and the reliability of information on different schooling options (including dropping out) vary across social and ethnic groups. When, at a branching point in the educational career, someone has to make a choice for continuation, one needs various pieces of information.

First, one needs to be informed about the possible alternatives. Which programmes are there to choose from? In the transition from primary to secondary education there may seem to be few information differentials – every school pupil knows that the choice is made between vmbo, havo and vwo – although there may be information differentials about school organizations or bridge years ('brugklassen'). In the transition from secondary to tertiary education a stronger information differential is likely, when children from more advantaged social backgrounds receive better information about the possible alternatives through a more active role of parents in the choice process, or because parents went to university themselves and have learned about the different options.

Second, one needs information about the (labour market and other) opportunities that open up with a particular qualification. Here strong information differentials can be expected. Children from advantaged social classes are plausibly better informed about the relative advantage in the social structure that a university degree offers, or the poor situation of vmbo school leavers.

Third, information affects the beliefs of children about the difficulty of a new educational programme. Social class may again have a strong influence here, because educated parents can inform their offspring that university completion is predominantly a matter of putting in effort, whereas the role of intelligence is modest. Working class children, by contrast, hear that one needs the intelligence of a true Einstein to be successful at the higher educational levels.

Now let us relate the information differentials thesis to tuition fee differentiation between selective and non-selective programmes. Would children of different social classes have different information about the selective programmes at their disposal? I think so. First of all children of different social classes vary in their knowledge of the existence of such selective programmes. Such information differentials can quite easily be overcome. Second, it is likely that children of higher social origins have better information about the benefits one reaps from such selective programmes. In an

age when a large fraction of a cohort enters higher education, it is essential to think of one's relative position in the educational distribution, not only of getting a mass university degree. It is likely that children of well-educated parents are more aware of this, and anticipate their educational choices likewise. I would therefore expect that there is a 'secondary effect' of social origin on enrolment in selective programmes independent of class differences in fulfilling admission requirements.

### **3.5. Increasing diversity of society and individualization**

A third trend in society concerns two developments that have strong implications on what I see as the fourth central task of schooling: preparing for active citizenship. This trend is a combination of two distinct processes: increasing individualization and increasing ethnic diversity of society.

Increasing individualization concerns the process that individual life courses and choices are increasingly detached from the influence of institutions such as the family, religion, social class, or politics (Beck 1992). Although sometimes empirically contested (De Witte & Scheepers 1999; Duyvendak & Hurenkamp 2004; Goldthorpe 2002), some aspects of individualization are clearly taking place, such as the decreasing household size, declining membership rates of religious organizations, and more volatile voting behaviour across elections.

Increasing ethnic diversity is a process that has been taking place in the Netherlands since the 1960s, with immigration from the former colonies (Dutch Indies/Indonesia, Suriname, Antilles), and from Mediterranean countries, mostly Turkey and Morocco, but also Italy and Spain. Since the 1980s and particularly 1990s immigration has increased of political refugees.

The two processes of individualization and ethnic diversity are not by definition related. Individualization could in fact be held back by immigration if immigrant groups show less individualization than the native population. Yet, both processes have severe implications for citizenship education, in particular because citizenship education has to deal with increasingly divergent backgrounds in

schools and classes. Teachers can no longer take for granted a particular set of values and attitudes among their pupils.

### **3.6. Implications of individualization and increasing diversity**

Before I go into the implications for citizenship education I first want to discuss the implications of increasing ethnic diversity for equality of opportunity.

The implication for equality of opportunity concerns the question whether our educational system works well for the promotion of equalizing educational opportunities by ethnic background. I think the Dutch system does a few things very good, but improvements are possible. Children from Turkish and Moroccan descent are kept behind in education, mostly through primary effects of ethnicity on school performance. Given a particular level of school performance and social class, however, ethnic minority children display rather ambitious schooling choices at the start of secondary school, at least in the early 1990s (Hustinx 2002; Van de Werfhorst & Van Tubergen 2007).

Yet, early drop out is also much higher among ethnic minority children than among youth from Dutch descent (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp 2003). Moreover, in systems with more diversification at the lower secondary level, such as the Netherlands, ethnic inequality in terms of secondary school performance is higher than in more comprehensive school systems (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2007). Given that secondary school performance is highly influential on the probability to enroll in tertiary education, this could lead to larger ethnic inequalities in tertiary participation in strongly stratified countries relative to comprehensive systems.

Now let us go with a bit more detail into the implications of increasing diversity and individualization on the formation of active citizens. Active citizenship has often been related to political participation, and citizenship education has been regarded in that perspective too (Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Niemi & Junn 1998). The question then is: how can education contribute to active political participation? More recently a more widely encompassing view of citizenship education has been put forward. This view holds that we should educate students to be “members of society who are able to participate in an active, responsible and critical way in a rapidly changing, pluralistic society” (Ten Dam & Volman 2003: 119). Participation in society is, according to this view, broader than just

participation in politics or work. Relatedly, political research on participation has extended the focus from politics to issues such as voluntary membership as it is illustrative of the democratic functioning of societies (e.g. Putnam 2000).

What are the implications of increasing diversity and individualization on citizenship education? First of all, if we accept that the ‘principle of justice’ in the domain of democratic participation should be equality, the state should optimize democratic equality (Miller 1999). Each citizen obviously has the right to vote and be elected at political elections, but there is systematic variation across social groups in their likelihood to use their democratic rights. From political science it is commonly known that individual resources and networks are important drivers of political and social participation (Brady et al. 1995). If the state has responsibility to optimize democratic equality, one channel to do so is through the educational system. Through education equalization of individual resources (read: civic competences) may be promoted. This equalization is particularly important in a society where the backgrounds of individual students are increasingly diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and in their attachment to institutions such as the church, social class and family. Or put in a slightly less ambitious way, but with the same consequences: the state should avoid to increase inequality of the resources/civic competences that students acquire in education. In an increasingly pluralistic society the educational system may be the primary channel through which commonly esteemed behaviours and values can be promoted.

Importantly, those commonly esteemed behaviours and values should not be too specifically oriented towards a particular culture. Otherwise citizenship education becomes education towards subscribing to the norms that could be considered legitimate by the dominant groups in society, but not by others. More important is the formation of critical individuals who know their rights and their way through society, and have the ‘cosmopolitan’ competences to defend their views and interests, and understand the views of others, in a diverse society (Osler & Starkey 2003). And politics (in the broader sense, including social movements and other intermediary groups) is an important arena where such potentially conflicting interests should be put forward.

The Dutch educational structure, with its early selection and strong vocational orientation, is ill-suited to promote citizenship education equally to its younger citizens. Youngsters come to develop their identity and personality during early adolescence, and precisely at this stage we select students in separate classes and school buildings, largely on the basis of cognitive achievements. As qualitative

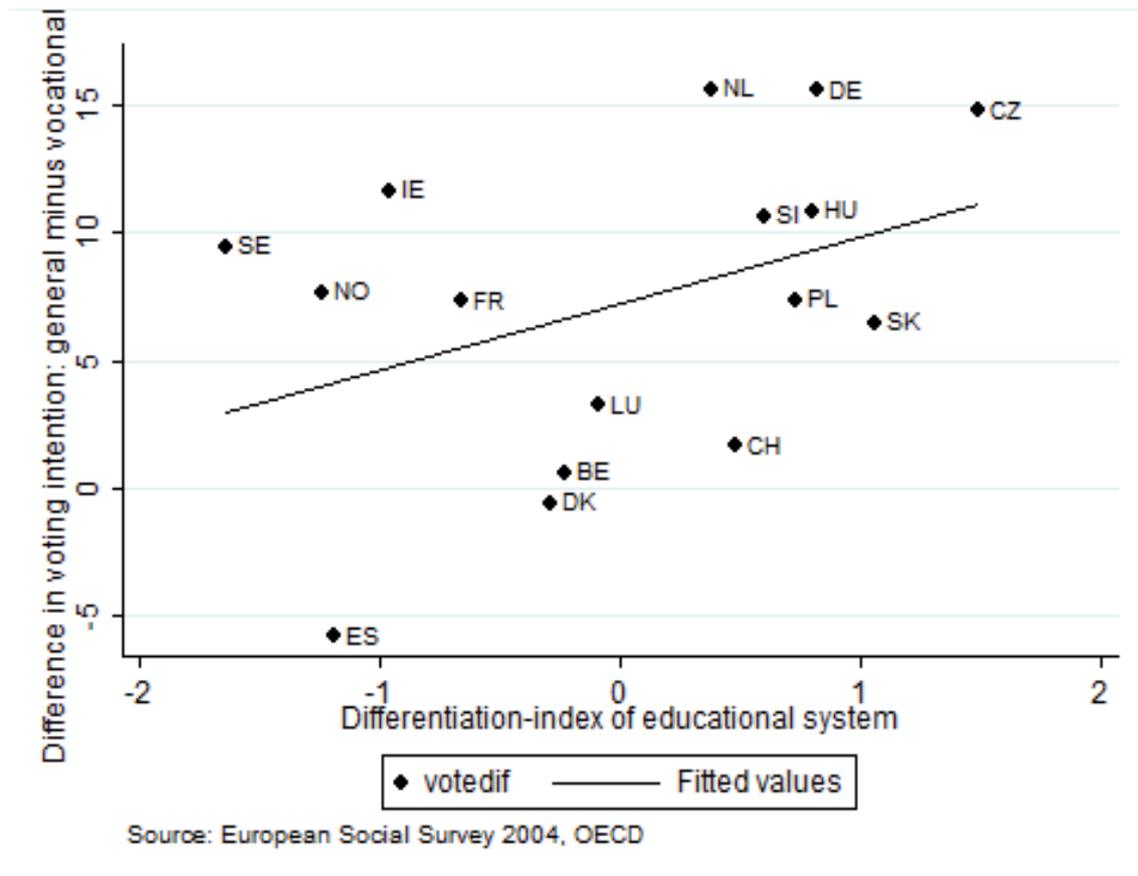
research by Ten Dam and Volman (2003) has shown, citizenship education towards the enhancement of social competences varies between secondary school types. At the (higher) general track citizenship education is strongly oriented towards the development of critical thinking, whereas at the (lower) prevocational track it was more strongly oriented towards the formation of instrumental skills that improves one's chances in life, such as social skills.

If we look at international differences, participation in voluntary organizations is lower among people educated in vocational tracks than in the general tracks, and more strongly so in countries with a well-developed and strong vocational sector (Van de Werfhorst 2008a). See figure 1 for a similar result with regard to self-reported voting intention at national elections. This figure shows that, within students that have upper secondary education as their highest educational attainment, the intention to go to vote is usually higher among graduates from upper secondary general education (in the Netherlands: *havo*, *vwo*) than among graduates from upper secondary vocational education (*mbo*). This can be seen by the positive value of the percentage point difference in voting intention at national elections. Moreover this difference gets larger in more strongly differentiating schooling systems (the horizontal axis, measured by OECD indicators of age of selection, tracking and vocational orientation). In the Netherlands, for example, the difference is more than 15 percentage points to the benefit of general secondary education, the highest in all countries. This could be explained by differences across schooling system in the attention that citizenship skills get within tracks. Possibly citizenship education gets much less attention in vocational programmes than in general programmes (in subjects like social studies, history), and has a different content less strongly emphasizing critical thinking and political interest formation.

As argued above, there seems to be a conflict between the labour market task and the efficiency task of schooling on the one hand, and the citizenship task on the other. Schooling systems that perform well in terms of labour market integration of school leavers and efficient learning should differentiate students and offer vocational programmes, preferably in the dual system. In other words, such educational systems focus on the differentiation of school leavers, so that qualifications get a useful signalling function on the labour market. However, with regard to the citizenship task schooling systems should offer equality of learning. We would not want the educational system to increase, but rather to reduce, individual differences in knowledge about institutions, current affairs, the political system, and democratic attitudes. Such an aim would require that we offer equal citizenship

education to everyone, certainly in the primary and secondary schooling levels. Such a commonality in citizenship education may be hard to realize in a system that (a) strongly differentiates pupils, and (b) has a strong vocational component.

Figure 1 Differences in voting intention between graduates from general and vocational tracks in Europe



What does this say about ethnic minorities? First of all, a strongly diversified educational system not just selects on the basis of demonstrated ability, but also (directly and indirectly) on the basis of social class and ethnicity. The reason for selection is efficient learning, as the total production of knowledge and skills may be increased by tracking and selection. A recent development in Dutch educational policy is in fact to strengthen the basic skills in response to perceived decline of these skills in the past decades (mathematics and literacy). But the evident downside is that selection also implies that students are separated for classes where efficient learning may not be the first priority, such as social studies (maatschappijleer), sports, and history. Rather, with regard to the types of competences developed in these subjects the primary focus should be on equality and bringing people together who are separated for classes where efficient knowledge production is central (mathematics, languages, e.g.). Thus, through the selective system groups are separated on the basis of social class,

ethnicity and cognitive skills that should benefit from joint education in other fields. This may be detrimental to mutual understanding of social groups.

To take an example, if a school wants to discuss ethnic integration as an issue that is relevant in contemporary politics and society, such a discussion would be much enriched if it involved pre-vocational track youth from ethnic minority descent and middle class children from the higher school track. Why should we separate students for discussing such issues? I think there is no clear view on this, besides that it is a by-product of the very rigid selection we impose on our students at the onset of secondary school. I agree that selection may be relevant for cognitive subjects, but I don't see why it is relevant for sports classes, history and social studies, certainly at the initial phase in secondary education. Couldn't we develop our educational institutions in such a way that we optimize learning of the basic skills by tracking, and yet build in opportunities for interaction between tracks for citizenship education? Wouldn't society benefit greatly from an educational system where interests in collectivities are promoted by equal citizenship skills?

Figure 2 below summarizes the various implications of the three societal developments for education's four central tasks.

*Figure 2 Three societal trends: challenges for four central tasks of education*

	<b>Four central tasks of education</b>			
<i>Trends</i>	<i>Labour market preparation</i>	<i>Efficiency of learning</i>	<i>Promote equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Citizenship preparation</i>
Changing labour market	(A) Providing relevant competences?	(B) Should the taxpayer pay for providing a signal?	(C) Relevant skills: originating from social origin?	
Desire for selection and excellence	(D) Increasing signal in times of educational expansion?	(E) Selection and allocation in advanced tracks in higher education?	(F) Social inequality in access to advanced tracks?	
Increasing diversity and individualization			(G) Ethnic educational inequality?	(H) Equality in Citizenship education?



## 4. The Dutch educational system: cheers and challenges

Given the challenges posed on the educational system by the changing societal circumstances we need to carefully reconsider some elements of the Dutch educational system. Does the institutional set-up of the Dutch educational structure help or hinder the realization of the four central tasks of schooling? There are three elements of the Dutch educational structure that need reconsideration: the balance between generic and vocational competences, the balance between basic skills and civic skills, and the balance between excellence and equality. In this reconsideration I start from the strengths of the system that we currently have, although improvements are needed to adequately educate our youth for contemporary society.

### 4.1. The balance between generic and vocational competences

A strong vocational sector at the upper secondary and tertiary levels is an important channel for youth to employment. The vocational sector as we have it in the Netherlands, with a significant involvement of employers (in the design of the curriculum, in offering apprenticeships), is something to cherish. Yet, there are challenges posed to the vocational sector, in particular with regard to the balance between generic and vocational competences.

There is an increasing pressure towards the vocational sector to improve on the provision of generic competences, like social and personal skills, work attitudes and problem solving skills. The governmental plan to change the curriculum of MBO schools towards competences-oriented education, is perhaps the clearest example of this tendency. The challenge is how to strengthen generic competences and at the same time maintain the distinctive character of vocational schooling relative to general schooling. For if the vocational programmes would become too generic, employers may

prefer graduates from general secondary programmes, leading to worse relative labour market opportunities and behavioral changes of employers against the vocationally qualified labour force.

The distinctive character of vocational schooling should be that generic competences are focused towards the occupational domain for which a programme prepares (Van der Velden 2006). Generic competences are more easily trained within occupational-relevant domains. Therefore, it is crucial not to exchange an increase in generic competencies for a lower emphasis on vocational skills. Given the changing occupational structure it may be needed to refocus the kinds of vocational skills our students should learn. But in any case there should be a strong occupationally-relevant dimension of the vocational skills and knowledge that students learn in vocational programmes at MBO and HBO level.

## 4.2. The balance between basic skills and citizenship skills

As argued above, the Dutch educational system does not have the ideal structure for citizenship education, if we aspire equality in citizenship education among youth (which I think we should do). Purely seen from the citizenship task of schooling it would be more appropriate to offer a comprehensive system with less rigid selection into separate tracks and school buildings. Citizenship education would be improved by promoting mutual understanding and appreciation among different social and ethnic groups. Communication is very important in this respect, and we offer very limited opportunities for communication among the groups that are separated in different tracks on the basis of cognitive ability and, indirectly and directly, social class and ethnicity.

Yet, another important task of schooling is to increase the basic skills of literacy and mathematics. An efficient schooling system optimizes the production of these basic skills. Recent developments show that the Dutch system is losing out on efficiency, given declining student achievements in cross-national surveys like PISA. It is usually argued that efficiency of learning is promoted by early selection, because groups of different demonstrated learning abilities can be educated at their own optimal level. Sometimes it is indeed shown that more selective systems have higher average achievement (Brunello & Checchi 2007), but this hypothesis has been refuted too (Hanushek & Wössmann

2005). In any case, a tracked educational system has the potential to optimize learning achievements, and given recent declines in average achievement it is not sensible to abandon the tracked system.

So what should we do? Should we maintain the tracked system in order to optimize the acquisition of basic skills? Or should we make the system more comprehensive to promote (equality in) citizenship education? In my view these are not the right questions to ask. A better question is how we can combine a system that optimizes cognitive learning (mathematics, literacy) with a system that allows for more possibilities for interaction among groups of different demonstrated abilities regarding civicism, politics, and mutual understanding. If we assume that cognitive learning is improved by putting children of similar achievements together, how can we facilitate that the acquisition of citizenship competences happens in classes where people interact? Such elements of education focussing on collectivities rather than individual gains may be particularly relevant in contemporary Western societies.

It is fair to say that citizenship skills partly overlap with cognitive skills -- literacy has, for instance, a strong positive effect on active citizenship behaviour (Dee 2004; Van de Werfhorst 2007). Thus, in a system that separates students for cognitive learning, it is unrealistic that citizenship competences can be fully equalized. Yet, another dimension of citizenship competences are acquired in classes specifically designed for the acquisition of civic competences, such as social studies ('maatschappijleer'), history and geography. Moreover, also sports is an important channel to improve citizenship skills, so sports classes can also be seen as relevant here. With regard to these classes, it is very well possible to facilitate interaction among diverse social groups. The fact that pupils in different tracks not only get separate mathematics and language classes, but also separate social studies, arts, and sports classes, is, I fear, an unintended consequence of cognitive tracking. Certainly at the lower stages of the secondary system citizenship education would benefit greatly from classes for pupils of different tracks. So, I would plea for a lower secondary system that selects students into separate tracks for cognitive learning (after the bridge years, see below), but not for non-cognitive subjects. If that leads to more equality and a higher level of citizenship competences at the lower secondary level, there are fewer problems with strong employer involvement at the upper stage of secondary schooling (in MBO).

The fact that there is a tendency in the Dutch educational landscape to exchange the broad bridge-years ('brede brugklassen') that offer comprehensive schooling in the first one or two years of the three tracks of vmbo, havo and vwo, for smaller bridge years covering only havo and vwo, does

not help to promote the interaction of students for citizenship classes. We should try to promote the broad bridge-years again for several reasons. One of them is that it is made easier to coordinate and implement common citizenship classes. Another reason is that a broad bridge year extends the crucial selection between vmbo, havo and vwo, and this extension will plausibly lead to a decrease in inequality by social class and ethnicity. And this will plausibly also affect efficiency of learning, when educational attainment becomes more strongly driven through the primary effects generated by differential learning achievements, and less strongly through the secondary effects generated by differential choices conditional on achievement.

Also the issue of track mobility is crucial in this respect; we should strongly promote the transfer from a vmbo diploma into havo, and not focus primarily on the route from vmbo to mbo. These two routes should be equally logical in the system, because it will not only reduce inequality of opportunity but also promote efficiency.

### **4.3. The balance between excellence and equality**

As I argued elsewhere, there is no need for a trade-off between excellence and equality – they could go hand in hand (Van de Werfhorst 2008b). However, for excellence and equality to join hands it is important that individual choices are increasingly generated on the basis of learning abilities and efforts, and decreasingly on the basis of class or ethnicity based choices independent of abilities and efforts. The questions then become how to equalize learning abilities without giving in on efficient learning (see above), and how to minimize social class and ethnicity effects on schooling choices conditional upon learning abilities. With regard to this last question it is crucial that educational decision making, and advices given by schools and teachers, are to a large extent based on nationally standardized tests. The final primary school test of Cito comes closest to such a test, and we should not reduce the impact of Cito test scores on educational advice. We should aim to standardize it by making it compulsory for all schools and all pupils, and improve the longitudinal nature of the testing. In schools that use the Cito test there is more equality of opportunity than in schools that do not use the Cito test (Luyten & Bosker 2004). Furthermore, we need additional nationally standardized tests during the first four years of secondary school. Preferably in a longitudinal form, increased testing

may help to monitor whether children are in the right track, and to give advice for further education after the first phase of secondary school.

In a country with mass higher education, it is a logical process to incorporate elements of selection and excellence into the system of higher education. Honours classes, university colleges, research master programmes, these are useful measures of excellence that improve on the signalling function of schooling on the labour market. The crucial questions with regard to equality are: (1) Do selective programmes improve the labour market opportunities for students? (2) Is there inequality by social class and ethnicity in the participation in selective programmes, and if so does this type of inequality result from primary or secondary effects?

I think we should distinguish among labour market outcomes in terms of finding matching employment to the discipline, and in terms of 'vertical' outcomes of stratification such as occupational status or income. With regard to finding matching employment the selective programmes may be particularly beneficial. Research jobs will be more easily given to graduates from research master programmes. More generally, employers in a particular branch of industry may be more informed about the kinds of selective educational programmes that are available, so that they recruit from these. Vertical stratification outcomes should be mainly seen in the long run; if PhD programmes increasingly recruit among graduates from research masters the initial earnings of research master graduates may not be particularly high in comparison to others. However, because doctorates give additional benefits in the long run, it is reasonable to expect long-term gains.

With regard to the question on equality of opportunity it is possible that particularly children from the middle classes enrol in selective programmes. Partly this could be driven by the higher tuition fees, seen at the university colleges. There is a more general tendency to plea for tuition fee differentiation depending on the benefits reaped from a particular programme. For instance, the Chair of the Governing Board of the University of Amsterdam (Karel van der Toorn) has pleaded for this in his opening address of the academic year 2008-2009. Above I have argued that tuition fee differentiation does not follow logically from increased selection and excellence. We first need to solve one crucial issue: do children of different social classes and ethnic groups have different information at their disposal concerning the costs and benefits of selective programmes? I think they do, so that would make me hesitant to find tuition fee differentiation acceptable. Moreover, even if students had the same quality of information, children of lower class (or minority) origins would still see a

higher relative risk of entering selective programmes; their financial buffer in case of disappointing gains is smaller than for middle class (or Dutch-descent) children. Additionally, the Dutch minister of Education, Culture and Sciences Ronald Plasterk, who was also present at the opening address of Van der Toorn, interestingly remarked that the higher education system does not function as a market because suppliers and demanders of selective programmes (i.e. lecturers and students) have similar (rather than opposing) interests.

One big challenge with regard to selection and excellence is how to increase school performance of the higher secondary track (vwo)? In comparative perspective there is a low dispersion of learning achievements among Dutch secondary school pupils. This results both from comparatively high performance of the low achievers, and from a comparatively low achievement from high achievers. So, even though the Dutch system offers a separate programme for six years to our best students (vwo), their performance is not particularly high. One reason for this might be that Dutch students hardly have any gains from good performance. Access to university programmes depends primarily on having completed the vwo track, and high grades do not provide additional benefits (besides a few exceptional programmes that do select on grades). As argued above, it is not evident that increasing selection after the gate of university entrance will immediately instigate higher ambitions and school performance of secondary school pupils. Yet, as elements of selection are available at the onset of university programmes, albeit on a small scale like the university colleges, it is likely that the logic of excellence and selection triples down to upper secondary programmes.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay I have analyzed whether the Dutch educational system adequately prepares youth for contemporary society, with a changing labour market, increasing calls for selection and excellence, and increasing diversity and individualization. I propose several possible avenues of development of the system.

First, at the first stage of secondary education we should combine tracked classes (in vmbo, havo and vwo) for cognitive learning with untracked classes for subjects where citizenship competences are taught (such as sports, social studies, and history). Adequacy of enrolment in cognitive tracks should be monitored regularly during the first stage of secondary schooling. Broad bridge years should be promoted.

Second, at the primary and secondary levels we should not reduce but increase standardized testing. Test should be the basis for monitoring cognitive track placement, and for selection in later stages of education. Standardized tests help to reduce inequality and at the same time foster the increasing call for excellence and selection. Selection and excellence should be promoted in higher education. Not only is more selection needed for the labour market, but the logic of excellence and selection may also triple down to upper secondary education.

Third, if we are able to equalize and optimize citizenship competences at the first stage of secondary education, we can maintain and strengthen the vocational component of the upper secondary and tertiary system (MBO and HBO). Vocational education should be aimed at contextualizing the generic skills in a vocational domain. We should thus avoid to reduce the vocational element in MBO (and HBO) programmes. Yet we should not be ignorant of the increasing demand by the labour market for (contextualized) generic competences in vocational programmes. A strong influence of employers on the MBO and HBO curricula with strengthen the position of school leavers on the labour market. And if we have done as much as we can to optimize efficient learning, reduce inequality of opportunities, and equalize and optimize civic competences, the smooth transition from school to work is a strength of the Dutch system we should want to maintain.



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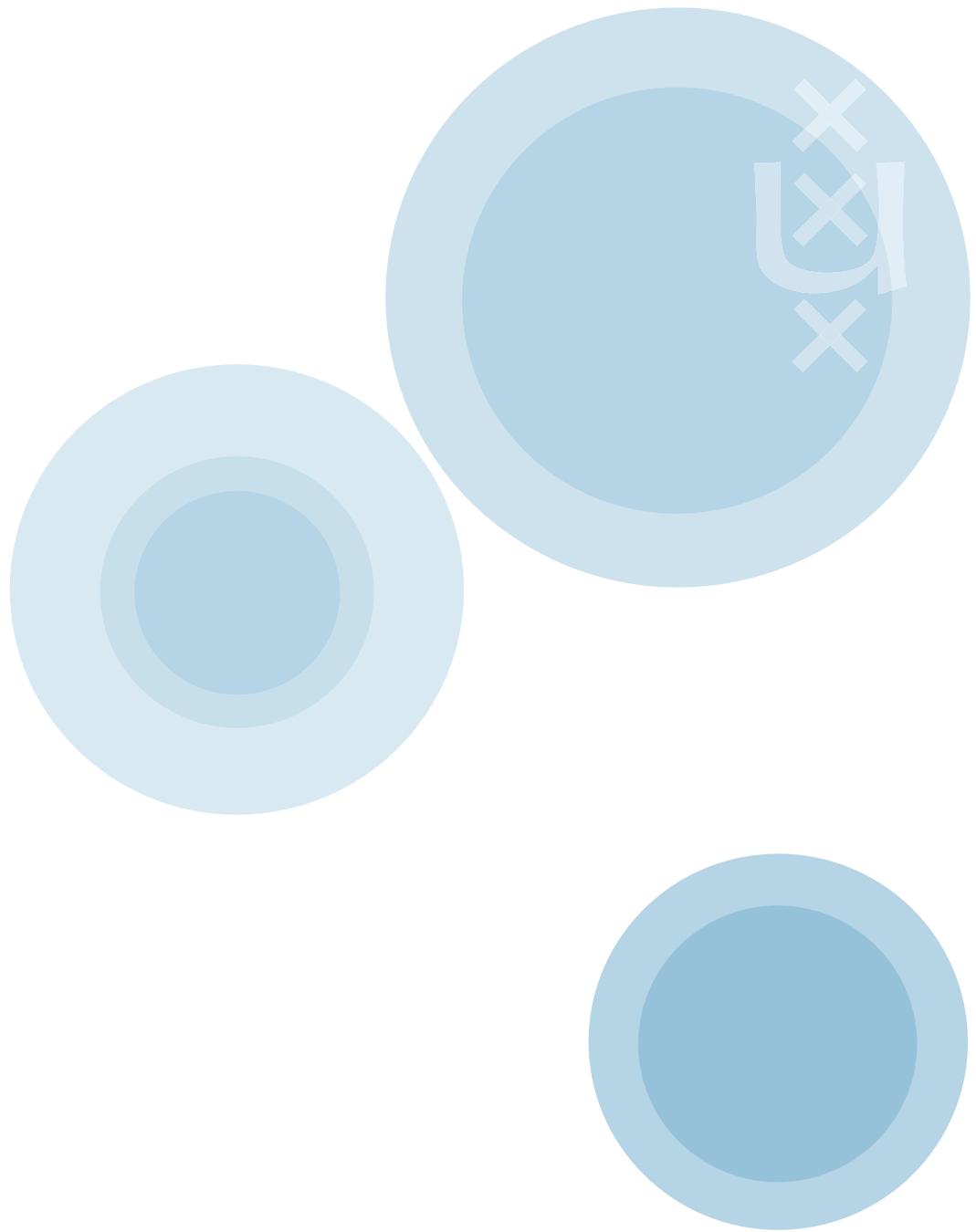
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- Wage formation, social policy and industrial relations
- The cycles of policy learning and mimicking in labour market reforms in Europe
- The distribution of responsibility between the state and the market in social security
- The wage-indicator and world-wide comparison of employment conditions
- The projects of the LoWER network







**Amsterdam Institute for Advanced labour Studies**

University of Amsterdam

Plantage Muidergracht 12 • 1018 TV Amsterdam • The Netherlands

Tel +31 20 525 4199 • Fax +31 20 525 4301

[aias@uva.nl](mailto:aias@uva.nl) • [www.uva-aias.net](http://www.uva-aias.net)