

From Expansion to Academic Drift and Declining Student Numbers: The Dutch Case

H.F. de Boer

Higher vocational education in the Netherlands has undergone a stormy process of development since the early 1980s. While, until then, it had been part of secondary education, within a few decades the sector developed into a fully fledged part of Dutch higher education (HE). This strong growth forced universities of applied sciences (UASs), like similar institutions in Europe, to develop into resilient, mature, and manageable organizations and to reflect carefully on their responsibilities within higher education. The growth of UASs is not only visible in the enormous increase in student numbers, but also in the expansion of their mandate. In relation to this expanded mandate, key issues for Dutch UASs today are academic drift and a recent decline in student numbers.

Characteristics of UASs in the Netherlands

The Dutch HE system has 14 publicly funded research universities (including the Open University), 36 publicly funded UASs, four publicly funded philosophical universities, and some private higher education providers. In this binary system, the research university and UAS sectors are referred to as “equal but different,” indicating that they are both part of HE but that each has its own mandate, focus, history, and culture. It is important to stress that the UAS sector is very heterogeneous. There are, for example, 10 UASs with more than 20,000 students as well as 10 institutions with less than 1,000 students (mainly in arts and teacher training).

In 2021, approximately half a million students studied at the UASs, of which 85 percent were registered full time. Over 100,000 students enroll annually, of which about 10 percent come from abroad (75 percent of those come from Europe). In contrast to many other European HE systems, the majority of HE enrollments, about 60 to 65 percent, are in the UAS sector.

The 1980s as a Tipping Point

In the 1980s, the foundation was laid for the UASs as they are known today. First, the ministry granted more autonomy to the UASs. This was a radical change because until then, UASs had been tightly controlled, especially compared to research universities. Second, reference should be made to institutional merger processes. In 1983, the ministry aimed

Abstract

Universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands have undergone a stormy process of development since the 1980s. Subsequently, a number of issues related to this growth have emerged and are currently the subject of reflection and discussion, in particular academic drift and recently declining student numbers.

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to substantially increase the average size of UASs and to reduce their number. As a result, the number of UASs declined from 375 in 1983 to 36 today. Third, the Higher Vocational Education Council was established in 1975 as their collective advocate and central contact point for the ministry. It proved to be an important factor in emancipation and policy-making and definitely left its mark on development in the sector.

The Sustainability of the Binary System

Over the past 40 years, the “binarity” of the HE system has been the subject of much debate. From the 1980s onward, the government has always defended the position of “equal but different” and has laid down this view into legislation. Both HE subsectors have their own legal mandate. In this way, the ministry wants to underline the widely supported belief in the virtues of a differentiated HE system (different institutions with their own distinctive profile).

However, reality does not easily allow itself to be squeezed into a legal straitjacket. In practice, we witness processes of academic drift at some UASs and of vocational drift at most research universities, which means that the boundaries between the two subsectors are gradually blurring. This has tempted many in the past to predict that it would be a matter of time before the binary system would implode. For now, however, there is no sign of this happening in the near future.

Issues Regarding the UASs

A number of issues are related to the broader mandate that the UASs have managed to acquire. This concerns the expansion of their functions, the expansion of the range of degree programs offered, and the change in the composition of their enrollments.

The UASs have a threefold function: teaching, practice-oriented research, and knowledge exchange with society. The research function is relatively new and shows the development that Dutch UASs have undergone. Unlike research universities, UASs did not have an active research function until the turn of the millennium. By introducing a new staff category in 2001—the *lector*, also known as UAS professor—an attempt was made to establish this research function. The main task of a lector was to carry out practice-oriented research with a group of colleagues (collectively, the “lectorate”), which was also meant to give significant impetus to teaching, so that UASs would train “reflective practitioners.” This research position has since then been further institutionalized, for example, through acquiring national funding (via the national research council), the introduction of quality control systems, and a strong connection with centers of expertise.

There are now almost 700 *lectors* active in the Netherlands, a small number considering the total number of employees. But since a “lectorate” not only consists of one or more lectors but also includes “teacher-researchers” and PhD students, the number of employees involved in practice-oriented research exceeds 700.

Although considerable steps have been taken in the establishment of the research function, UASs remain primarily educational organizations. Despite its annual growth, the size of their research income is modest, namely 6.3 percent of all financial resources. In comparison, 60 percent of the funds at Dutch research universities in 2019 were spent on research.

The type of programs that UASs offer has increased considerably over the past decade. After the introduction of “Bologna” in 2003 (an ongoing process at the European level aimed at establishing a European Higher Education Area, among other measures, by creating a similar degree structure throughout Europe), UASs were in principle only allowed to offer four-year bachelor degree programs. Nowadays they also offer two-year associate degree programs and one- or two-year master programs. These UAS programs are vocationally oriented rather than theoretically focused. In contrast to research universities, UASs do not have the right to offer PhD degree programs (*ius promovendi*). However, they want to start their own doctorate programs: the professional doctorate (PD). In doing so, they want to push the boundaries in professional practice. This will enable a learning continuum from a bachelor via a master degree to a doctorate. The PD aims to be of a level equivalent to a university PhD, but has a different character; internationally, its title, the PD, is recognized differently.

Over the past four decades, enrollment in Dutch higher vocational education has grown strongly, from just over 300,000 in 2000 to almost 500,000 in 2020. This has put UASs under considerable pressure (growing pains), but recently a turnaround seems to be visible. The market share of the UASs vis-à-vis research universities is decreasing. While a few years ago, more than 65 percent of HE students opted for a UAS program, now that percentage is below 60 percent. In particular, the number of Dutch students opting for UASs is declining (a drop of 10 percent in 2021 compared to 2020), although not equally strongly in every region. In some regions, these declining numbers are likely to cause serious problems.

The decline in the overall number of UAS students is somewhat masked by the still rising number of international students, although far less than in the research universities. Currently, there are approximately 35,000 international students enrolled in UASs, corresponding to 7 percent of the total UAS enrollment.

International Relevance

Like its counterparts in other European countries, the Dutch UAS sector is undoubtedly facing exciting times. On the one hand, we see a persistent academic drift that translates, among other things, into a further development of the research function and the possible introduction of the third cycle (with the PD degree). As a result, the “binarity” of the system will remain under pressure. On the other hand, we see a decline in student numbers. The tension created by growth and shrinkage will require a strategic re-orientation at many UASs. ▲

*H.F. de Boer is a researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, the Netherlands.
Email: h.f.deboer@utwente.nl.*