THE NETHERLANDS

Government Pushes Students Onto the Fast Track

AMSTERDAM—It's 11 o'clock in the morning, and a young man climbs onto a bus carrying a suitcase. Suddenly, inside the suitcase an alarm clock starts ringing. "You must be a student," says the driver. Dutch students have a reputation for taking a leisurely approach to their studies, epitomized by this well-worn joke. But many will argue that this reputation is a hangover from a bygone era.

Long gone are the days of the early 1970s, when engineering students at Delft University of Technology took an average of 8 years to get a degree, and 10 years for a master's was not unusual. Over the past 2 decades, the government has tightened requirements, forcing the universities to process students in roughly half that time. The latest set of reforms came just 18 months ago, when the government announced a round of budget cuts and curriculum changes aimed at encouraging more intensive, specialized education. The end result, educators say, will be more structured courses and more variety among the universities, as individual institutions begin to specialize in specific areas.

These changes are transforming the nature of higher education in the Netherlands, says Jan Veldhuis, president of Utrecht University. Twenty-five years ago, he says, students were expected to take an active part in student societies, to obtain a more rounded education. "Getting a degree would take so long because you would spend a lot of time at club activities," he says. Now, getting a degree in as short a time as possible is the overriding goal.

The first steps in that direction came in the 1970s, when the government was faced with the task of trying to make room for the rapidly growing student population. Student grants were linked to study performance. Degree courses were restricted to 4 years, and students were put under pressure to complete their studies soon afterward. "What happened in the 1970s was an attempt, based on the assumption that higher education should be open to a large number of people, to introduce 'uniformity' into the system," says Aad Nuis, state secretary of education, culture, and science, who, with Minister Jo Ritzen, is largely responsible for higher education policy in the Netherlands. Universities began to offer similar curricula and degrees of equal quality.

In 1994, the newly appointed government had to confront another crisis in higher education: lack of money. Prompted by the need to cut $310 million from the higher education budget, the government announced a sweeping set of plans that drew an angry response from the universities (*Science*, 26 August 1994, p. 1168). Tensions eased when a compromise was struck to raise tuition fees over a 3-year period—a move that reduced the required cuts to $125 million. But the government pressed ahead with a set of reforms that were spelled out last September in the Higher Education and Research Plan (HOOP). They include plans to slim down higher education by restricting the number of students, reducing the amount of time to get a degree, and cutting down the dropout rate.

Many feared that this would make the Netherlands' already selective higher education system even more restrictive. "We have a layered system which selects within secondary education," says Veldhuis. "In the Netherlands only 12 to 15% of an age group obtains a diploma that gives access to university." But the government enjoyed a demographic windfall: A decrease in the birth rate of around 30% during the early 1970s will, according to government figures, reduce student numbers enough to fit within the plan and make possible the $125 million budget cut.

With finances and student numbers effectively removed from the equation, the HOOP plan still requires two major reforms of Dutch higher education: shorter degrees and specialization in universities. "One of the problems we have is that the actual time a student spends at university is still high," says Nuis. "Although the courses are given over 4 years, the universities have not yet succeeded in finding a way of making the completion of study in that time possible."

Part of the HOOP plan involves general measures helping students to complete their degrees on time, such as the streamlining of course and exam schedules and stronger incentives for study. The government's plans to reduce study time by coupling it to student grants are not eagerly awaited by students, however. University students currently need an average of 5.2 years to obtain a master's degree, says Baukje van Nunen, a student at Eindhoven University of Technology and vice president of the National Student's Union. She denounces the government's intention to reduce this to 4 years by only giving student grants for that time. "We find clubs and other extracurricular activities to be an important part of our personal development," she says.

But perhaps the most significant change proposed in HOOP is a move away from the policy of uniformity. This is wholeheartedly endorsed by Veldhuis: "The time has come for differences between universities and for more competition. I agree completely with the idea of courses geared to excellence." One of the first steps toward differentiation was the establishment of "research schools," national research institutes specializing in a particular field in which several universities participate, starting in September 1992. "Special high-quality courses would complement perfectly these research schools," says Veldhuis. "In our postgraduate programs we have to dare to make a differentiation between a 'normal' training and an 'excellent' training, an idea that until recently wasn't really accepted here."

In the harsh economic realities of the 1990s, it now seems certain that Dutch students will be getting a less rounded but faster education. And at some point, the alarm-clock joke will need to be recast. Six-thirty might be more appropriate.

–Alexander Hellemans

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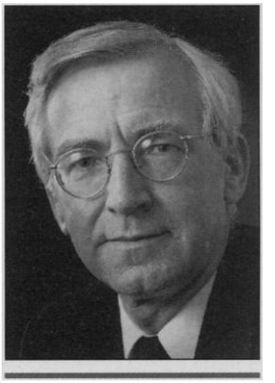

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Changing tradition. Utrecht University, like others in the Netherlands, is graduating students in less time.