



Moving towards equality of opportunity in secondary vocational education ('MBO')

February 2024

Part 2: What do the data and practice tell us?

Backgrounds and home situations influence educational outcomes

Back in 2016, the Dutch Inspector of Education found that students with a migration background or whose parents had lower levels of education were more likely to be in secondary vocational education at a lower level than other students of comparable ability and to experience inequality of opportunity. As a result, these students fail to make full use of their capabilities, talents and skills. And this has an adverse and lifelong impact on their opportunities in the job market, as well as on their financial position and well-being. On top of that, the Netherlands as a society misses out on what these young people could contribute if they had been able to make optimal use of opportunities available during their school careers.

Minister of Education, Culture and Science prioritising measures to combat inequality of opportunity

In recent years, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science announced various measures to help achieve equal opportunities for students in secondary vocational education (MBO) compared with other students. They included making it easier for them to obtain grants and student travel products. The minister also made agreements with and provided extra funding to MBO institutions to encourage them to do more to reduce inequality. For the period 2019-2022, an additional €1.6 billion of funding was made available, without the minister specifying how much of it was to be used to promote greater equality of opportunity. For the period 2023-2027 the minister has made in total an additional €3.8 billion of funding available to improve the quality of secondary vocational education. One of the priorities in this respect is

to promote equal opportunities, with the minister having specifically allocated over €1 billion for this purpose for the period 2024-2027.

The measures announced for this period focus on removing barriers highlighted in our audit.

Despite the minister's measures and funding, vocational students' backgrounds and home situations still seem to influence their educational outcomes

Many of the students we interviewed during our audit said they were satisfied with the guidance and support they received from their schools and colleges. However, we also found that not all students had the same opportunities to perform well.

Migration background and parents' level of education influence opportunities

We can see this in our quantitative data analysis of vocational students and their educational outcomes, which showed that:

- students with a non-Western migration background are overrepresented in the lowest level ('MBO 1') of vocational education: they account for 61% of the students on these programmes, while comprising only 24% of all students in vocational education;
- students with a non-Western migration background have a higher chance (12.5% points) of moving on to a higher level of education than students without a migration background. The difference is smaller (2.8% points) in the case of students with a Western migration background compared with students without a migration background;
- students whose parents have a higher level of education are more likely to move on to a higher level of education themselves than those whose parents are less well educated (difference: 4.9% points);
- students whose parents completed school education above the second-lowest of the four pre-vocational levels (*VMBO kader*) have a lower chance (1.1% points lower) of dropping out of school without a diploma than students whose parents have a lower level of education.

Poverty and educational outcomes

Our discussions with students, tutors, mentors and training organisations providing internships and apprenticeships found that poverty can adversely impact on educational outcomes. Many students, tutors and mentors also regularly gave examples of how students were treated differently (i.e. discriminated) because of their backgrounds or disabilities.

Students' backgrounds and home situations continue to influence their school careers. Despite the policy measures and extra funding made available by the minister, our analysis of data from DUO (the organisation implementing education regulations) and our discussions gave no indication of any reduction in inequalities.

Where MBO students follow programmes or do internships matters. And so do their supervisors

Not all MBO students get the extra guidance and support they need. Whether they get the necessary guidance and support to follow and complete their programmes varies from institution to institution, from programme to programme and from one tutor or internship supervisor to another. We found, for example, that a student's chances of completing a programme and then moving on to a higher-level programme varied substantially, and indeed more between different sites *within* an MBO institution than between different MBO institutions. This was also found to apply in the case of students with and without a migration background. In other words, the impact of a migration background may be minor at some MBO sites, but substantially greater at other sites. The differences we identified both between and within MBO institutions in respect of the guidance and support provided to students were also confirmed by our analyses of the quality agendas for 2019-2022 and day-to-day practice at the seven MBO institutions in our audit.

Some MBO students continue to experience inequality of opportunity at one institution and would fare better at another institution. This also applies *within* MBO institutions. As a result, some people's weaker starting position is simply perpetuated. This is a serious matter because an MBO diploma provides an important basis for young people's subsequent careers. As far as equal opportunities are concerned, it makes a difference where students do an education programme, internship or apprenticeship, or who supervises them.

Minister's efforts have removed some barriers and facilitated measures

Our audit found that the measures and extra public funding made available by successive ministers have removed some of the barriers facing MBO students. As students confirmed to us in interviews, access to funding and student travel products, for example, have made it easier for those with few financial resources of their own (or whose parents are low earners) to undertake vocational education. We also asked MBO institutions' directors and staff whether they thought that the minister's efforts had had an impact. They indicated that the agreements with the minister and the accompanying funding had enabled them to take concrete steps to improve equality of opportunity. These included making more provision for guidance

and support to help students to overcome difficulties with mathematics or language, to make appropriate decisions on education and jobs and to obtain educational and training materials.

Clearer policy guidance needed from the minister

We attribute the differences identified *between* and *within* MBO institutions to the minister's decision to allow institutions to determine their own policies and decide for themselves how to spend their budgets. In doing so, the minister did not make the following sufficiently clear:

- what exactly he understands by 'equality of opportunity';
- when exactly he wants to see an improvement in equality of opportunity and for which groups of students;
- the specific extent of equal opportunities that he wants to achieve.

Students consequently do not know, for example, what the minimum level of help they can count on if they experience difficulties during their education, internship or apprenticeship and cannot resolve difficulties on their own. MBO institutions' boards are also free to select the measures they want to use to improve equality of opportunity and generally extend this freedom to tutors and mentors. The latter then decide for themselves how much guidance and support to offer students, without any obligation to provide at least an agreed minimum level.

Minister has too little insight into progress

We also found a lack of information on what the measures and the extra funding designed to boost equal opportunities had actually achieved, primarily because the minister and the MBO institutions' boards lack:

- insight into the current situation regarding inequality of opportunity in the MBO and any progress achieved, also regarding the groups that the measures specifically aim to help. One of the reasons for this was the lack of a zero measurement;
- insight into the extent to which measures and their related budgets help to achieve equal opportunities for MBO students.

As a result, neither the minister nor the institutions' boards know which measures do and do not work in practice. But it is precisely this insight that is needed to improve the policy on equal opportunities and to ensure that public money made available for this purpose is used as efficiently as possible. Similarly, the minister does not have sufficient information to inform the House of Representatives on whether policy is efficient and effective. In other words, whether it represents value for money.

The minister has since sent a plan to the House of Representatives setting out how progress on the *Werkagenda MBO* [MBO Working Agenda] and the *Stagepact MBO* [MBO Internships Pact] can be monitored. While we see this as a positive step, we do not regard the monitoring plan as going far enough to resolve the information-related problems identified.

How can the minister and institutions' boards more effectively target efforts to achieve equality of opportunity for MBO students?

It is important that the minister and MBO institutions' boards *jointly* establish guidelines for putting equal opportunity policies into practice in the MBO.

We recommend, therefore, that the minister and MBO institutions' boards should jointly agree:

- *What exactly is meant by 'equal opportunities' and how this should be expressed in measurable and verifiable terms?*
- *What results are to be achieved by the 2027 year-end and which clearly defined groups of students should be evidence of these results?*
- *What basic information is needed to determine whether and to what extent MBO students' opportunities are equal? And what information is needed to determine whether measures and budgets are effective?*

The minister can include the outcomes of this joint exercise in policy article 4 ('Adult and vocational education') in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's budget for 2025 and in the progress reports on the *Werkagenda MBO* and *Stagepact MBO* from spring 2025 onwards, as well as posting details on www.ocwincijfers.nl.

Lastly, in chapter 7 of our report, we specify various additional points that the MBO institutions' boards need to focus attention on if they are to improve equality of opportunity.

Minister understands and supports our opinions and recommendations

The minister's response of 17 January 2024 confirms that he understands and supports our opinions and recommendations. Given that the government is currently a caretaker government, he is cautious about giving any concrete undertakings. However, he has undertaken to discuss our report and recommendations with the MBO Council and MBO institutions so as to establish any scope for jointly making the current agreements more targeted and specific. The ministry will therefore take the initiative to gain more insight into whether measures designed to achieve equal opportunities are effective, both at a national and regional level. Lastly, the minister stated that the multi-year forecast for secondary

vocational education, higher education and academia and the Interministerial Policy Review (IBO) of vocational education in the future, read in conjunction with our report, will provide a good substantive basis for a new government to set and prepare policy going forward.

Clear agreements and insight into policy effects

We look forward to being advised of the outcomes of the discussions between the minister, the MBO Council and MBO institutions. We emphasise the importance of setting concrete objectives and determining target groups *in advance* and of *subsequently* ensuring proper insight into measures' effectiveness, including at a programme and site level. Our audit showed that there is no time to lose if the MBO is to result in personal growth and development for the many young people on these programmes and provide them with solid foundations for the rest of their lives. And if Dutch society is to benefit – which it certainly needs to – from all the capabilities, talents and skills that these young people can offer. We therefore expect a new government to translate our opinions and recommendations into concrete action. And this is something we will be keeping a close eye on.

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More information

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