CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN FLANDERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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1 Purpose of the present recommendation

In this recommendation the Vlor, or Flemish Education Council, reflects on the societal trends that codetermine the course of Flemish higher education, the related challenges and the way higher education can respond to them.

In our rapidly changing society, higher education is confronted with the challenge of preparing young people and adults for tomorrow's society. Policy makers love using these words, but which changes in society are they actually talking about, and which standard do we use to measure the speed of these changes? Can we even form a reliable image of 'tomorrow's society', so that we can actually draw up long-term plans for higher education?

In his book *Thinking, fast and slow* Nobel Prize Winner Daniel Kahneman (2011) expresses our inability to make reliable statements about the future as follows: *We are prone to overestimate how much we understand about the world and to underestimate the role of chance in events. Overconfidence is fed by the illusory certainty of hindsight.*

Let this be a warning to the reader of this policy recommendation. In this text we do not make any predictions about what our society and our higher education will look like in 10, 20 or 50 years. However, the Vlor wants to contribute to the debate by identifying important societal trends and, despite all insecurities, by examining how a sustainable higher education policy can respond to those trends.

This recommendation would miss its mark if it were regarded as a one-off exercise for our policy makers. It will only be usable if it is subject to repeated reviews of the basic principles and the proposed solutions. Societal trends are indeed prone to change. The Vlor in any case commits itself to this attitude. This may prevent the council and the policy makers it advises from falling into the trap Kahneman points out, namely of suggesting solutions and taking decisions too rapidly and based on the instinct of a too limited number of people. In that sense, this recommendation fits in with a system of permanent and systematic quality control of the higher education policy.

For the elaboration of this recommendation, the Vlor based itself on existing literature but also on the insights of experts and representatives from the work field.

2 History of the Flemish higher education policy

Since the Flemish higher education became a Flemish competence in 1989, it has undergone some drastic changes. Most importantly, Flanders did not miss the connection with the European policy developments in higher education. European agreements, such as the Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) of 2008, were transposed into Flemish Parliament Acts and Government of Flanders Decrees which are put into practice by the higher education institutions by means of reforms of the education organisation and investments in quality assurance and innovation.

Along with the rapid inclusion of those European developments came the strive for a better organised and more easily manageable Flemish higher education landscape. The teaching competences of institutions were more clearly defined, associations of universities and colleges of higher education were formed, and mergers of universities and especially colleges of higher

education were carried out. Moreover, procedures were developed in order to guarantee a manageable and effective provision of Flemish bachelor and master programmes.

A third striking evolution in policy and legislation is the explicit recognition of the student as a participant and stakeholder in higher education. Bodies to defend the student's interests and to safeguard his/her rights, such as the Student Council and the Council for disputes about decisions on study progress, were laid down in a Flemish Parliament Act. A fundamental development, in line with the principles of the Bologna Declaration, was the drafting of the legislative framework for the set-up and quality of the programmes in the bachelor-master structure from the learner's perspective. Training programmes are no longer defined by subject contents to be taught, but by learning outcomes that must be achieved by students.

A final important development is the use of performance indicators for the financing scheme of higher education within a practically closed envelope. The first money flow for higher education institutions is no longer based on student numbers, but mainly on educational outcomes (the number of credits acquired, diplomas) and research performances. At the same time, the financing system contains a number of mechanisms that should encourage these institutions to pursue an equal opportunities policy. The increased flexibility of education programmes has made students more responsible for their individual study progress. To that end, the study credit system was introduced.

Table 1 provides an overview of the milestones in Flemish higher education policy in the past decades. It only contains the most important Flemish Parliament Acts on higher education. It does not contain any regulations regarding research, innovation and service provision. The Council is aware that this regulation sometimes has an impact on the education in the institutions. The numbered Flemish Parliament Acts on education, which contain measures or adjustments for higher education, are not included either. Some of the listed Flemish Parliament Acts have undergone modifications after their year of implementation.

Year	Milestone	Changes
1989	State reform	Education becomes a Flemish competence
1991	Flemish Parliament Act on the universities (12 June 1991)	– study areas (educational competence) – credits (ECTS), exam grades transfer, individually tailored year programmes – quality assurance system (visitations) – doctoral programme – new staff categories (academic assistant staff, independent academic staff) – evaluation of academic staff and administrative and technical staff – envelope funding (frozen in 2000 for the universities)
1994	Flemish Parliament Act on colleges of higher education (13 July 1994)	– mergers of colleges of higher education (from 165 to 22 colleges of higher education) – alignment with the regulations regarding universities

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1999	Bologna Declaration (19 June 1999)	Initially 6 lines of action, extended to 10 in 2001 and 2003: – easily readable and comparable degrees (learning outcomes and diploma supplement) – two main cycles: undergraduate (bachelor) and graduate (master) – credit system ECTS – mobility of students and teachers (°Erasmus - 1987) – European co-operation in quality assurance (European Standards and Guidelines) – European dimension in the curricula – lifelong learning – higher education institutions and students as active partners – attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (Erasmus Mundus) – doctoral studies as third cycle and promotion of young researchers
2003	Flemish Higher Education Reform Act (4 April 2003)	– a single Flemish Parliament Act for universities and colleges of higher education – bachelors and masters / professional and academic – bachelor after bachelor and master after master programmes – bridging programmes and preparatory programmes – diploma supplement – associations – accreditations and initial accreditations (NVAO) – higher education register, macro-efficiency of new training programmes – teaching language – extension to 2-year master programmes in natural sciences and engineering (2006)
2004	Flemish Parliament Act on the Legal Position and Participation (19 March 2004)	– regulation of activities and competences of student councils – participation/co-government – Council for disputes about decisions on study progress
2004	Flemish Parliament Act on flexibilisation (30 April 2004)	– abolition of study years and installation of credit system – diploma, credit and examination contracts – previously acquired qualifications and competences (EVK and EVC)
2004	Flemish Parliament Act on study financing and student facilities (30 April 2004)	– extension of student facilities – extension of study financing
2006	Flemish Parliament Act on teacher training reform (15 December 2006)	– integrated teacher training (professional bachelor) – specific teacher training of 60 credits at colleges of higher education, universities and centres of adult education

2008	Financing Flemish Parliament Act (14 March 2008)	– educational part and research part / basis and variable – education variables: input and output funding – research variables: master's degrees, doctoral degrees, publications & citations, external and female independent academic staff – credit weight of training programmes – weighing for specific students (scholarship students, working students, disabled students) – study credit – fund for the promotion of diversity: promotion of equal opportunities
2009	Flemish Parliament Act on the Qualifications System (30 April 2009)	– Flemish Qualifications System (VKS) with 8 education levels based on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Higher education is situated at levels 5 to 8
2009	Flemish Parliament Act HBO5 and SenSe (30 April 2009)	– introduction of education types of EQF levels 5 (HBO5) and 4 (SenSe)
2012	Flemish Parliament Act on student facilities (29 June 2012)	– equality of financing student facilities in universities/colleges of higher education – integration of the student facilities non-profit organisations in the colleges of higher education – extension of the access to student facilities
2012	Flemish Parliament Act on the new accreditation system (6 July 2012)	– institutional reviews and programme accreditation
2012	Flemish Parliament Act on Higher Education Integration (13 July 2012)	– professional bachelors at the colleges of higher education; academic bachelors, masters and doctors at the universities – schools of arts at the colleges of higher education – adapted regulation regarding teaching language

Table 1 - Milestones in the Flemish higher education policy of the past decades

In this recommendation, we examine whether Flemish higher education has sufficiently developed and whether it can still develop sufficiently rapidly in order to respond to societal changes we can already observe today.

3 Societal trends: globalisation as a challenge

To which societal evolutions will higher education be subject in the next decades? We look for an answer in the major societal, demographic, economic, technological and administrative trends of today's society. They are all related to the continuing globalisation.

3.1 Demographic developments

Demographic developments must be monitored at a global level. The world has reached a population of 7 billion, and in 2050 it will probably climb to 9 billion. The population growth causes problems all over the world, such as scarcity of food, water and energy supplies. Human impact on the climate is mapped out increasingly clearly by scientists. Linked to political and economic problems, the consequences of the climate change and scarcity set large migration flows in motion. An ethical issue we are confronted with as a result of these problems is the huge amount of people who still live in extreme poverty (more than 1 billion).

Life expectancy increases worldwide, although it decreases in certain regions. An increasingly large amount of people enjoy a healthy and active life way past the age of 70. Simultaneously with an ageing society, countries or regions with high immigration rates undergo a rejuvenation: an increase in the - mostly urban and often low educated - population younger than thirty years.

3.2 Societal developments

Globalisation creates migration flows that multiculturalise society. This widens the outlook and promotes the exchange of ideas. However, this complex society is also a very dual society where groups that are in a weaker socio-economic position are lower educated and where highly-educated persons participate better in all fields of society. Dealing with this duality and making sure all talents are employed, are among today's major societal challenges.

Globalisation also entails regionalisation, the so-called glocalisation, which may result from a growing uncertainty and a loss of overview. The global labour market indeed offers opportunities, but can also be very threatening to local employment and the societal network of a region. However, regionalisation also has certain advantages: a local clustering of expertise, capacity, service provision, etc, makes it possible to better respond to the local needs.

The economic crisis causes higher unemployment. This also has societal consequences, such as an increase in poverty, in the number of suicides, and a reduced participation in the societal network. The societal context has become increasingly complex in the past decade. For instance, the family reality has strongly evolved in recent years, and the number of patchwork families, lone-parent families and single persons increases. Families have become smaller and less stable.

3.3 Technological developments

Fifty years ago, thirty years before the advent of the Internet, Marshall Mcluhan already described the world we live and communicate in as a *Global Village*. In the meantime, the continued growth of the Internet is stimulated by the access to and the integration into technology and consumer goods and behavioural patterns. However, the developments in communication, data transfer and societal media have not yet come to an end. Moreover, thanks to their increasing computing power and the ever larger amounts of information they can receive, store and open up, pocket size computers that are linked to the Internet will be able to perform increasingly complex tasks.

Developments in brain research increasingly allow us to outline our brain's activity, for instance when performing cognitive tasks. Currently, a number of devices are already available to train staff members who have to carry out complex and dangerous tasks. These devices are about the

size of a mobile phone, and deduce the degree of concentration of an individual from the registered brain activity.

A number of technological developments have an impact on the way industry evolves worldwide. Large industrial plants could be reduced in size by the use of digital on-line equipment, which allows for the integration of the consumer into the production process. Changes in the way industries organise themselves will also have an impact on higher education.

3.4 Economic developments

From an economic perspective, globalisation means the spreading of production processes and markets across the world. Until the eighties of the past century, industrial production and knowledge production were concentrated in the countries around the North Atlantic Ocean and in Japan. The rise of the Asian tigers, followed by the BRIC countries, brought this concentration to an end. Economic, technological and political world powers are now also developing around the other major oceans.

Since late 2007 global economy has been going through a rough patch. The credit crisis developed into a global economic crisis which put great pressure on businesses and the financial position of certain governments. Cost cuts affect sectors that are financed by the government, including (higher) education.

3.5 Administrative developments

Society has become increasingly complex at the administrative level as well. This also applies to organisations with global activities. More administrative levels, from the very local to the global ones, are expected to interact and cooperate both horizontally and vertically. This new multi-level governance influences the way in which organisations, governments, communities and individuals communicate with each other. Administrative complexity indeed often entails a loss of transparency and a lack of coordination. As a result of globalisation, themes such as good governance, corporate governance, democratic participation, accountability, (academic) leadership and networking are given new interpretations.

Higher administrative complexity requires another form of public management: there is a need for increased efficiency and efficacy, and more strategic insight.

4 Does higher education evolve sufficiently rapidly?

Due to the above-mentioned societal trends, higher education is faced with great challenges, which are to a large extent identical for Flanders and for our neighbouring countries or the US. Higher education must be able to respond to these challenges in an innovative manner. Of course, it has to assess autonomously which trends are worth incorporating and which trends are too transitory. In this, it is important to find a balance between dealing with the changing society and maintaining continuity.

In the past century, the higher education institutions played an important societal role but will they still be able to do so in the 21st century? In *The Challenges Ahead for Higher Education*, Daniel Yankelovich describes a number of trends which he believes will radically transform higher

education by 2015 (!) ... provided they encounter little resistance (Yankelovich, 2005). The author mentions five trends in higher education which he believes deserve more attention:

1 *Changing life cycles of an ageing population.*
The strict division between education and work is under pressure as the group of over-25s who still want to (continue to) study increases. At the same time, the strict division between work and retirement is under pressure as the group of active over-55s increases.

2 *Growing vulnerability in science and technology.*
Compared to most new emerging world powers, our Western economies have the greatest difficulty in attracting talented young people to natural sciences and engineering programmes and in having them move successfully through these programmes.

3 *The need to understand other cultures and languages.*
As a result of globalisation, we will increasingly cooperate or compete with entrepreneurs, scientists, technologists, designers, ... from very different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, immigration has made our own living environment increasingly multicultural. It is essential that - among other things through higher education - young people get a thorough and well substantiated understanding of other cultures and learn to communicate both non-verbally and in other languages.

4 *The lack of societal mobility.*
Education does not yet sufficiently succeed in making young people from deprived backgrounds move on to and complete higher education. These young people are thus stuck in low-paid jobs or unemployment because of the outsourcing to low-wage countries.

5 *Other ways of knowing and finding truth.*
Science is held in high societal regard, but at the same time many people think science cannot provide an answer to all existential questions. In higher education the humanities are appreciated as a form of higher culture but they are on the defensive against the natural sciences and engineering in terms of the way in which knowledge is gathered and the truth is pursued.

The retrospective (see 2) shows that Flemish higher education has strongly evolved in the past 20 years. However, the Vlor is concerned that Flemish higher education still takes insufficient account of the incredibly rapid evolution in the world, and does not anticipate this enough. Yet, innovation and change are the conditions for the existence of every organisation today, and society has high expectations for higher education. For the Vlor change must go hand in hand with a supported vision indicating what Flemish higher education should stand for.

5 What kind of higher education do we pursue?

What type of higher education is capable of responding to and providing relevant solutions for the above-mentioned societal trends? In its recommendation on the structure of higher education, the Vlor already reflected upon a general vision for Flemish higher education at the beginning of the 21st century.[1] This vision was formulated on the basis of six principles for higher education: high quality, international orientation, societal relevance, dynamism, democratic participation and

[1] Flemish Education Council, Higher Education Council *Advies over de structuur van het hoger onderwijs*, 9 March 2010.

sustainability. The council still supports this vision. It updates this vision and summarizes its principles in three clusters.

5.1 High quality and dynamism

The first cluster of principles focuses on those educational and learning activities and organisational forms which the Vlor finds essential for the quality of higher education. High-quality higher education:

- enables students to develop into autonomous learners who take active responsibility for their own learning process;
- effectively realises the added value of the qualification (the diploma) in the form of acquired knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes;
- interweaves education, research and innovation;
- is independent, and has its own logic and finality but nevertheless interacts with society.

Educational institutions must be powerful, dynamic and stimulating knowledge centres with a great attraction for young people and adults, that keep a finger on the pulse of societal trends and economic needs and can respond to them in a flexible manner.

5.2 Societal relevance, sustainability and international orientation

The second cluster contains functional principles that focus on higher education's assignment. Higher education must prepare students for their role as employees, entrepreneurs or other professional actors. However, it must also train them to become committed, independent and critical citizens who are aware of their role in society. Higher education must guard the field of tension between economic use and a sense of civic responsibility, and ensure a good balance between those two.

Given this assignment, higher education must allow students to acquire essential insights and skills in order to put sustainable development into practice. Currently it concerns sustainable use of energy and transport systems, sustainable consumption and production patterns, health, media skilfulness and responsible global citizenship. Sustainable higher education is education that stimulates entrepreneurship with a long-term vision and thus pays attention to corporate societal responsibility, societal economy and corporate ethics.

All societal trends point out the need for a cross-border international approach. Cooperation in the field of education and research, sending students abroad and receiving foreign students lead to new insights that stimulate Flemish higher education and research. Of course, higher education must critically reflect upon the evolutions abroad and must not abandon its individuality. Not all international trends are positive. For instance, globalisation can also lead to far-reaching commodification of higher education. Higher education must teach its students how to deal with these trends, to participate in the evolving society but also to adopt a critical view on the matter.

5.3 Democratic participation

The final cluster contains the principle that higher education must be based on democratic participation.

Higher education must be a means to promote societal mobility and to realise greater societal cohesion. Maximum use of talent, creativity and innovation are needed to keep up Flanders' and Europe's societal, cultural and economic position. Everyone who intrinsically has the capacity and motivation for it, must be able to participate in higher education regardless of his/her socio-economic or socio-ethnic background. Higher education must therefore acknowledge all talents and maximally develop its role in lifelong learning.

Higher education has a clear societal forum function. It is a place where ideas grow, mature and are discussed in all freedom. Higher education is a partner in the global societal debate. Its task consists of critically evaluating societal trends and acknowledging the challenges they raise.

Democratic higher education trains students to become critical citizens and prepares them for functioning in a democratic, multicultural society. This higher education teaches its students democratic and participatory values as well as to cooperate and to think freely.

6 Towards a Flemish higher education policy of the 21st century

With the above-mentioned vision as guideline, and with the ambition to tackle the described challenges, the Council presents for each part of this vision (the three clusters) a number of concrete points of interest for education policy for the coming years.

This recommendation focuses on higher education. It does not, however, question its current assignments (education, research, service provision and arts practice). It assumes higher education will continue to accomplish them in the future and it intrinsically recommends a strong interwovenness of these assignments.

6.1 Organisation and activities

The Vlor believes that, to promote the dynamics of high-quality structural and educational developments in higher education, the Flemish policy must pay attention to:

- the organisation of the higher education landscape, in particular the relation between professional and academic education, and the relation between bachelor and master;
- on-line education;
- studying in the 21st century, with research-based, student-centred and interdisciplinary learning as key concepts;
- the concept of the academic year as a structural organisation element.

6.1.1 Higher education landscape

6.1.1.1 Academic and professional: a continuum

The differences between academic and professional higher education are not absolute but relative. It concerns differences in accent. They both must

- enable students to develop an attitude of lifelong learning;
- impart and develop fundamental and applied knowledge;
- teach a research attitude;
- create opportunities on the labour market;
- train students to become critical citizens.

Flanders has recently opted for an institutional division between professional and academic education. The first type is provided by the colleges of higher education, the second type by the universities.[2] However, this does not imply that bachelor education, which is education at level 6 of the Flemish Qualifications System, of one type has to develop entirely independently from the other type. On the contrary, through consultation and cooperation higher education institutions have to evolve towards a whole of accessible education programmes in which the inflow and transition of students are self-evident. This should be realised within a structure that stimulates rather than hinders this cooperation. Within the framework of this evolution, the choice for an institutional division between professional and academic higher education might turn out to be superseded in the future. The continuum may also appear to be insufficiently realised, and new types of education programmes may appear to be necessary in order to respond to certain societal needs. It is important that Flemish higher education keeps reflecting on this.

6.1.1.2 Two cycles with greater independence

The question arises whether the bachelor and master programmes need a greater degree of independence. For instance, is the current master programme, especially the one of 60 credits, not too much a continuation of the academic bachelor? Do the (academic and professional) bachelor and master need more specific work and test forms that are geared to achieving their own objectives? Comparative studies about the introduction of the master programme in various European countries indicate that it lacks a clear identity (Sin, 2012).

Master programmes have their own finality. Compared to the bachelor programme, a master programme has a deepening and/or broadening function and also prepares for a doctoral degree. It must be considered whether the finality of the master programme needs more diversity. Options are, for instance, research masters, educational masters and entrepreneurship-oriented masters. Through adapted work and test forms and blended learning, the master training programmes can also integrate, more than is currently the case, into a system and a (still to be developed) culture of lifelong learning.

With a greater degree of independence of the bachelor and master programmes, the academic bachelor can also have an outflow finality. The point of this is not to make the master programmes into elite training programmes, only meant for a small number of bachelors. Focussing on a provision of various types of master training programmes, which all meet the generic requirements of the European/Flemish qualification structure, can contribute to an increased accessibility of this education level for learners who aspire to it. Of course, the outflow finality of the academic bachelor programme must be valorised by the labour market. It must also

[2] The higher arts studies , both the professional, the academic and the higher vocational training courses, were organised into autonomous Schools of Arts that come under the colleges of higher education. The academic nautical training courses continue to be organised by the "Hogere Zeevaartschool".

be examined what the consequences are for the financing of institutions within the current financing mechanism.

The increased autonomy of bachelor and master programmes will create a greater need for bridging programmes that can replace the current bridging and preparation programmes. Also, the contents, transparency and coherence of these bridging programmes will have to be reconsidered. A flexible connection between the bachelor and master level that is adapted to a maximum extent to the various target groups, is necessary.

With a view to greater autonomy, the student workload of a number of master programmes and possibly also bachelor programmes will probably need to be adapted.[3] This must obviously go hand in hand with a well-considered analysis and the guaranteeing of a number of preconditions. Increasing the duration of studies, for instance, results in an increased societal cost, a later entry into the labour market and a higher study cost for the student.

6.1.1.3 Developing the entire higher education landscape

Apart from the bachelor and master programmes (EQF levels 6 and 7), higher education also contains the training programmes in HBO5 (EQF level 5) and the doctorate (EQF level 8).

It is important for the higher professional education (hbo5) to be further fleshed out in the future and be provided as a fully-fledged form of higher education. This means serious efforts must be made in terms of quality management, the trainee's status, etc. If higher education is to turn out more highly-educated persons (Van Damme, 2010), then HBO5 has to play a role in this. Moreover, HBO5 needs sufficient financing in order to realise its specific objectives. Sufficient attention must also be paid to the transfer from and to bachelor programmes.

The doctorate can play an important role in the development of current knowledge-based economy. The question is whether this is sufficiently the case today. Is the doctorate research - both in the humanities and in natural sciences and engineering - sufficiently valorised in Flanders? Does the labour market sufficiently respond to this? Does higher education, on the other hand, sufficiently reflect upon the role of the doctorate in an innovating Flanders? In this, the Vlor refers to questions about the number of doctorates, their contribution to innovative research and their broad societal relevance. In the past years, all universities have established 'doctoral schools', whose missions pay attention to the career development of doctoral students as creative knowledge workers. The Vlor therefore appreciates the decision of the Government of Flanders to provide funds for the support of young researchers (Government of Flanders Decree, November 2011).

6.1.1.4 On-line higher education

According to the Flemish Parliament Act on the qualification structure (2009), a diploma or qualification stands for 'a comprehensive and classified set of competences'. Through (international) mobility and the recognition of previously acquired qualifications and competences, these competences are also increasingly acquired outside the walls of the university college or the university that issues the diploma. This crumbling of diplomas may

[3] Adapting the student workload of a number of study programmes is a discussion that is also currently being held as a result of dossiers such as turning the teacher training into a master programme, the European regulations in the care sector, 2-year master programmes in humanities, etc.

become an ultimate threat to the higher education institutions (Kirschner, 2012). On-line education, linked to the increasing communication possibilities of multimedia, has the potential to apply these forms of mobility and flexibility on a much larger scale. On the Internet, students will find increasingly better learning materials for acquiring their competences, as a result of which they may also obtain a certificate through adapted forms of assessment. This development currently does not pose a real threat to the classical diplomas of our higher education institutions. However, if higher education fails to turn out enough graduates with the appropriate qualifications, the question is how potential employers will evaluate this on-line education, whether certified or not.

One must not ignore the scale effects on-line education may generate, which may make education cheaper and more accessible. Already today the Internet provides high-quality learning materials that are consulted by an enormous amount of formal or informal learners. Although prestigious institutions like the American MIT were and still are the pioneers of open-source study material, an increasing amount of private providers, both profit and non-profit, are exploring this market. In the Netherlands the *Open Universiteit* pioneers the development and application of open educational resources (Open Universiteit, 2010). The Dutch government also has made substantial investments in the platform *Wikiwijs*, an open digital platform for exchanging and developing teaching materials for all levels of education.

Flemish higher education policy must prepare itself for these evolutions. The use of on-line courses can create a considerable increase in the productivity of higher education, without hindering the effectiveness in terms of learning results to be achieved. If higher education institutions want to continue to play a meaningful role in this evolution, they will have to focus more strongly on this educational innovation through reorganisation and training of personnel. The government can stimulate this by means of a targeted investment and innovation policy. It can also gather and support institutions (even across the different levels of education) for joint projects in which on-line education can be the key to successful results within the context of blended learning. However, we should not underestimate the cost of this type of reforms. The development and use of on-line higher education requires the necessary guidance by qualified personnel.

6.1.2 Studying in the 21st century

Higher education institutions should be environments where young people and adults can (further) develop into critical and responsible citizens and creative and qualified professionals. That is higher education's mission (see 6.2). Higher education institutions accomplish that mission by means of a number of specific qualities that turn them into unique players in the societal system. The Vlor highlights a number of qualities which it considers to be essential for higher education institutions where young people and adults of the 21st century want to and can learn. It would be dramatic if students regarded higher education merely as a phase one 'has to' pass through in order to assure themselves of a diploma (defensive necessity).

6.1.2.1 Research-based learning

The Boyer Commission's report *Reinventing Undergraduate Education* (1998) states the following regarding the mission every university should have:

The ecology of the university depends on a deep and abiding understanding that inquiry, investigation, and discovery are the heart of the enterprise, whether in funded research projects or in undergraduate classrooms or graduate apprenticeships. Everyone at a university should be a discoverer, a learner. That shared mission binds together all that happens on a campus.

According to the report, the fact that research-based learning should be or become the standard at the universities, as it once was, has its origins in the insight that learning is not based on the transfer of information but rather on the ability to 'discover' with the necessary guidance and support.

However, research-based higher education is not limited to the universities, and neither to the master programme. The Veerman Commission formulates in its report *Differentiëren in drievoud* (2010) the importance of research in the professionally oriented higher education as follows:

Research is important for education because it promotes reflection upon professional practice as well as an investigating attitude. It also leads to the curriculum's renewal and may contribute to innovation in companies and societal organisations. It is also necessary in order to be able to compete at international level.

The Vlor supports this statement.

Research-based education starts from the questions students ask about the 21st century's problems (Brew, 2006). In order to be able to contribute to solving these problems, they have to be capable of generating new insights and breaking through artificial boundaries. To that end, students have to acquire the necessary knowledge and develop the required skills, with an appropriate degree of specialisation. They also have to be able to respond sufficiently rapidly and flexibly to the problems society confronts them with.

The Vlor recommends a reinforcement of the nexus between education and research. This should be expressed in the working forms used. To this end, an adequate methodology has to be developed, and sufficient attention has to be paid to the professionalisation of teachers.[4]

6.1.2.2 Student-centred learning

The starting point of research-based education formulated by Brew fits in completely with the vision of the Vlor on student-centred learning.[5] Student-centred learning is a vision on learning that is based on the idea that the learner builds knowledge and rebuilds it on the basis of new knowledge with a view to obtaining a meaningful product and to acquire competences. Student-centred learning is based on the idea that the student wants to learn, wants to develop and assumes the necessary responsibility and commitment to that end, and that learning is a societal process (which can be learnt from others).

The Vlor is convinced that student-centred learning has a positive impact on the motivation and retention capacity of students, and can thus lead to a higher educational output. More than traditional education, it responds to the rapidly changing society. For students who have grown up with new media, it can be a solid base to discover, stimulate and use new skills. Student-centred learning goes hand in hand with the use of teaching methods such as group work, peer

[4] 'Teacher' is used in this advice in its general meaning, and does not refer to the specific status of 'lecturer' in colleges of higher education or universities.
[5] Flemish Education Council, Higher Education Council *Advies over studentgecentreerd leren*, 13 December 2011.

teaching and peer assessment. Student-centred learning requires a strong cooperation between students and educational staff. A partnership must be created that starts from a continuous dialogue and is based on mutual respect. In its definition of research-based learning the Boyer Commission describes this as follows: *Inherent in inquiry-based learning is an element of reciprocity: faculty can learn from students as students are learning from faculty* (Boyer, 1998).

For the implementation of student-centred learning, teachers must have insight in recent educational developments, a certain degree of flexibility and expertise to make the educational content and teaching methods increasingly student-centred. This is quite a challenge in itself, for which teachers require the necessary support and professionalisation. Today this training often takes place ad hoc.

It is best to examine whether a more structural training can be provided for teachers in higher education as well. At Flemish level, no standards exist for the organisation of educational training in higher education, and during the external evaluations the provision and organisation of educational training is only marginally evaluated. At the very least, consultation must be provided in order for institutions to recognise each other's training programmes. At coordinating level as well, it should be examined whether efforts can be made regarding a standard for this training (programme). This requires consultation and agreements. Currently only informal networks exist in which education developers and supporters of the institutions consult with each other.

It is important to reflect upon the competences that teachers in higher education must have. The same is true for the pathways that can be followed to this end. For instance, it can be examined how to incorporate this in the doctoral programme, whether assistant training programmes can be part of the doctoral programme, and which pathways can be followed by teachers in colleges of higher education. The Vlor recommends that institutions (whether or not in a partnership) and the government work on an educational training programme for higher education that integrates the principles of student-centred learning.

6.1.2.3 Interdisciplinary learning

According to a joint edition of a number of leading Dutch research institutions, drawn up on the basis of interviews with scientists, interdisciplinarity in research has an added value from at least four perspectives (RMNO, KNAW, NWO, COS, 2006):

- *A societal added value:*
  Interdisciplinary knowledge allows for an improved examination of complex issues;
- *A scientific added value:*
  Interdisciplinary cooperation (sometimes) leads to new concepts, models and methods;
- *An organisational added value:*
  Interdisciplinary cooperation can yield new partnerships, projects and research funding;
- *A personal or more competence-related added value:*
  Working in an interdisciplinary manner enriches the academic existence.

Despite this added value, interdisciplinary research does not have the academic recognition of research in the traditionally recognised disciplines. The latter are precisely the solid pillars of the academic structures and reward systems.

In higher education as well, interdisciplinarity is still treated in a stepmotherly way, probably for the same reasons as in research. Nevertheless the Vlor believes that focusing on an increase in

interdisciplinary learning is the right choice and fits in with the vision on research-based and student-centred learning. This type of learning starts from questions students ask themselves about societal or scientific events and problems for which the answers are seldom found in one single discipline.

The structures of the educational organisation are usually based on the individual disciplines. However, structures should be at the service of learning, and not vice versa. More interdisciplinarity in education does not necessarily lead to a lack of disciplinary depth, although one has to remain observant in that respect. The concepts and methods a student masters in a certain discipline, can be deepened by confronting them with concepts from other disciplines or by applying them in settings in which students from different disciplinary backgrounds (learn to) cooperate in order to solve scientific or societal issues. Work forms such as case studies, project-based education, bachelor's and master's theses and work placements, for instance, are suitable for interdisciplinary learning.

The Vlor advises that interdisciplinarity should be taken sufficiently into account by education programmes when developing the frameworks for subject-related learning outcomes. It thus also becomes a necessary point of attention during visitations and accreditations.

Finally, the Vlor points out the existence of education programmes with an integrated provision of the humanities and the exact sciences. They aim at students who perform above average. Many examples can be found at American universities and the University Colleges in the Netherlands. It is recommended to examine whether such programmes could also attract more young talents in Flanders and offer them perspectives to careers that require a high level of intellectual, academic and professional development.

6.1.3 The concept of the academic year as structuring element

Today, the organisation of the academic year is still determined to a large extent by the classical contact education the generation student attends. Harmonisation with lateral entrants, working students and on-line education is required. The question is to what extent the 'academic year' concept will appear to be usable in the future in order to shape higher education. Higher education must permanently reflect upon this.

At most Flemish higher education institutions, the number of weeks in which educational activities are planned (the number of 'lecture weeks') is fairly limited. On the other hand, a relatively large number of weeks are reserved for the organisation of examinations, including the resits. As more activating forms of education with integrated testing of competences are introduced, the classical resit becomes an anachronism. In that new context, resits are only useful to restore small specific shortcomings and cases of force majeure. In that case, the resits must rapidly follow the regular examinations, which means at the end of each semester or module.

As a result of the flexibilisation of education, the need for a clear education-free period between two academic years increases. Today in Flanders there is no clear distinction between the end of an academic year and the start of the next one. Resits indeed almost always coincide with the restart. By clearly dividing two academic years, the transition to a next part of the study pathway or a further training programme can be better organised and better prepared by the student. It leaves more room for the organisation of summer schools for which recruitment can also be done

at international level. The current continuum puts a very heavy burden on staff members and students. A resting period can remedy this situation.

6.2 Mission

Highly-educated people must have what are called 'skills for the 21st century', which they must be able to apply in different, rapidly evolving and flexible contexts. During an analysis of a number of competence frameworks (EU, OECD, UNESCO, ...), Voogt & Roblin (2012) found that it concerns the following competences: communication, cooperation, digital literacy, citizenship, creativity, solution focused thinking, productivity.

This means that young people and adults must be able to develop, refine or maintain the above-mentioned competences in higher education. That is why higher education cannot limit its target group to young people who have little or no experience on the labour market. It must increasingly assume its role in lifelong learning and respond to the specific competences and needs of lateral entrants. Higher education institutions have to examine whether and how they can integrate this assignment, starting from their own mission, into their educational policy.

6.2.1 Sense of civic responsibility

Graduates must be independent, critical and committed citizens who can use their own, societally responsible pattern of thought.

Imparting a critical attitude can occur in every part of every training programme, or can take the form of societally embedded projects. This is possible in both professional and academic training courses. The Vlor therefore suggests that institutions develop a structured provision for students who want to take up a certain societal commitment. In that way, the institution reinforces its regional embedding and students are given the opportunity to explore new contexts. The Council does not exclude the possibility of allocating credits for this.

The higher education institutions themselves also have the duty to take up a societal commitment. The right balance must be kept here as well: the institutions contribute to society, they are an integrating part of society but they also have to be sufficiently critical with regard to this society.

6.2.2 Alignment with the labour market

The Vlor makes a distinction between initial competences and growth competences. It is important for a graduate from higher education to start on the labour market with the necessary competences. However, it is also important that they are able to renew knowledge, skills and attitudes. They must also have these competences in order to deal with the increasingly complex and rapidly evolving society. That is why the Vlor is not in favour of strong alignment to specific labour market sectors, which leads to training programmes with a very narrow orientation. This may be necessary in certain specialisations, but it is equally important for higher education students to be broadly trained and to be able to apply their acquired competences in different contexts.

It is therefore very important that training programmes and specialisations find a balance between direct employability and sustainable competences. Higher education thus escapes from

a too strong dependence on the economic logic. The general societal relevance of the higher education training programmes must prevail.

The Vlor therefore recommends broad programmes and the integration of a flexible mindset and an attitude for lifelong learning in every qualification of higher education. Students must also be informed about the advantages this has. Today they are too often inclined to choose a training programme with a very specific name.

Currently there is, on the one hand, a shortage of graduates in sciences and technology. Especially women are less inclined to choose these courses of study. The government wants to change this by means of the 'Action plan for promoting careers in mathematics, exact sciences and technology. 2012 - 2020.' In its recommendation on this action plan, the Vlor emphasises that every citizen should have sufficient baggage to participate in a society that is increasingly shaped by science and technology. The Council therefore wants a thorough debate on the interpretation and place of general education in secondary education.[6] On the other hand, men should be stimulated to choose more often for care professions.

The Vlor would like to see more inflow, transition and outflow of scientific and technological courses of study in secondary education, in higher education and in adult education. That is why more and better route counselling is needed, as well as a stronger connection between informal and formal learning experiences. There is also a need for a pedagogical approach that responds to the learners' interest and eagerness to learn and that seduces them to be engaged in science and technology.

6.2.3 Sustainability

Higher education contributes to the search for sustainable solutions to the 21st century's global problems (see 3 and 4) by means of research and innovation. However, higher education also has the duty to make its students aware of these problems and to provide them with the necessary (growth) competences to deal with these problems. In this, a critical attitude, flexibility and innovative strength are indispensable. Higher education also has an exemplary role in dealing with these problems.

That is why it is essential that sustainability is integrated at all levels of the higher education organisation (in the curriculum, but also extracurricular and in all layers of the organisation). By turning out an increasing number of highly-educated persons, higher education contributes to sustainable societal progress. OECD surveys (*Education at a glance*, 2011) indeed indicate that the higher the number of highly-educated people in a society, the more societal progress can be found: less need for repression, less need for remediation in health care, etc.

Sustainable development is a theme that is suitable par excellence for interdisciplinary education (see 6.1.2.3).

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[6] Flemish Education Council, General Council. *Advies over een stimuleringsplan voor wetenschappen en techniek in het onderwijs*, 24 March 2011.

6.2.4 Internationalisation

6.2.4.1 No purpose in itself

Given the societal developments (see 3), the basic assignment of higher education must be (re)considered from a global perspective. The internationalisation of the training programmes is therefore not a purpose in itself but rather an essential means for the high-quality development of competences that are needed to function in a globalising society. Those competences are identical to the above-mentioned 'skills for the 21st century'. The exchange of knowledge and insights, learning and working together with foreign teachers and students and learning to deal with cultural differences lead to new insights that can be used both in later professional life, in scientific research and in education and training. They also allow the participants to view the organisation of education at their own institution from a somewhat critical distance.

Exchange must not be limited to Europe and should take place both at bachelor and at master level. Physical mobility as well should be kept in mind with regard to exchange. The organisation of on-line education in internationally composed groups or seminars becomes increasingly feasible for educational institutions and provides opportunities for actual cross-border and intercultural cooperation between students and teachers.

Internationalisation would miss its mark if it does not fit in with an integrated vision on higher education and if it is nothing more than a collection of loose initiatives of education in English or cooperation agreements with foreign institutions (De Wit, 2012, and Van Hove, 2012). It is a basic requirement for each university college and university of today. The visitation and accreditation process must ensure that institutions integrate internationalisation in all of their training programmes in a qualitative manner. Quality marks for internationalisation thus become superfluous.

6.2.4.2 Development Cooperation

Both universities and colleges of higher education can play a valuable role in terms of development cooperation. Students and teachers must get sufficient opportunities to participate in exchange programmes in partnering institutions in the South. The financing must remain guaranteed to that end.

The Vlor is of the opinion that partnerships abroad can only be realised on the basis of equality. The realisation of *brain circulation* is a priority in this. One-sided *brain drain* or *brain gain* must never directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, become a policy objective of the Government of Flanders or of the colleges of higher education.

On the one hand, the Vlor recommends foreign staff members and students to use the experience and knowledge they have gathered here or during guest lectures, to the benefit of their home country's society. The home country thus also benefits from sending and receiving its staff members. This problem is especially of topical interest in the relation between the Western world and the developing countries, between Eastern and Western Europe, between Europe and America. The Council argues in favour of the higher education community taking up greater responsibility on this matter. There is a need for more knowledge on the theme and a better cooperation in this field. On the other hand, Flemish students and teachers can also gather

experience in the South and/or share their knowledge and expertise with students and teachers on site.

When Flemish institutions organise a higher education provision abroad, they should respect local culture. It must be ensured that the local higher education does not come under pressure, and that staff mobility also leads to an exchange of ideas and knowledge within the framework of such projects.

6.2.5 A solid teacher training

Teacher training plays a central role in the educational field. Therefore it needs to be a factor of stability. The government must not constantly adapt it, but obviously teacher training must be attuned to the societal developments. The broad society, including underprivileged groups, must therefore be reflected in the teaching team, and teachers must be able to deal with diversity in the student population. The evolutions regarding on-line and blended learning must be followed in order to make sure the teachers of tomorrow have the necessary competences to commit themselves to these forms of education. In accordance with the recommendation on alignment with the labour market (see 6.2.2), teacher training programmes must be training programmes in which growth competences and broad employability are important. The Vlor insists on the inclusion of all teacher training programmes in the Flemish Qualification Structure (VKS).

Flanders faces the threat of a teacher shortage. Already some disciplines have trouble finding well trained teachers. Adequate solutions are urgently needed. In this context, the teacher training also has to be examined. Especially the attractiveness of teacher training (and of the teaching profession) must urgently be increased. This is why some people are saying the teacher training should become a master programme. Whether this will actually increase the attractiveness of teacher training still requires examination. Turning the teacher training into a master programme will extend the duration of the training programme but will also change the positioning of the training programme in the VKS. If this scenario is considered, account should be taken of the increased cost of the training programme organisation, the increased cost at employment (masters instead of bachelors), the societal consequences for the inflow, and the changed profile of the training programme. All of these elements require a very thorough justification which should not be judged lightly, and which should be properly discussed with all parties involved.

The various training programmes and secondary education need to cooperate in order to shape actions that promote the transition towards teacher training programmes.

Given the problematic inflow of students in STEM training programmes (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), teacher training in those disciplines deserves increased attention. Research reveals that students of teachers with a thorough training in mathematics or sciences score better on mathematics and science tests and then increasingly choose a STEM training programme (Wingert, 2012). The challenge is to guide more young people and also working adults with a STEM background to the teacher training programme, and to keep them in the teaching profession afterwards.

6.3 Democracy and participation

The Vlor thinks democracy is such an important societal good that it requires a specific treatment in the development of a vision and policy for higher education. The Vlor thus wants to prevent

democracy from being seen as an obvious skill or situation that automatically results from the development of certain professional or academic competences. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (*Not for Profit*, 2010) indicates the danger of a too narrow approach of the assignment of education:

In the past decades, a silent crisis has occurred in the education sector. For a long time, education was regarded as the place where students learn to think critically and are trained to be developed and understanding citizens. However, ever since we place economic growth above everything else, education also aims at turning out economically usable and productive students.

This shortsighted focus on profitable skills has eroded our ability to criticize authority, reduced our sympathy with the marginalized and different, and damaged our competence to deal with complex global problems. And the loss of these basic capacities jeopardizes the health of democracies and the hope of a decent world. (Nussbaum, 2010)

6.3.1 Accessibility of higher education

6.3.1.1 Drawing on all talents

Higher education offers opportunities for self-development and emancipation. Moreover, today's and tomorrow's knowledge-based society needs more highly-educated people (Van Damme, 2010). Whoever has the intrinsic possibilities, should be able to start higher education and should be stimulated to do so. The added value of higher education indeed translates into a loss for those who cannot have a higher education diploma for improper reasons.

The initiatives that are taken today, however meritorious they are, are modest in size and are insufficient to deal with the rejuvenation of our society (see 3.1). Institutions and the government are looking for the success factors that play a determining role in the transition of underprivileged groups towards and in higher education. A good analysis of the transition figures and of the effects of the measures taken (embedded in the regional context) is urgently required.

Flexibilisation is conceived as an incentive in the democratisation process by removing administrative obstacles for the access to and transition within higher education. It should be able to realise an increase in the participation rate of underrepresented groups in higher education, as well as an increase in lifelong learning. Today, it seems flexibilisation is mainly used as an individual right.

The question is how flexibilisation could be better used in order to allow democratisation to break through. The Council thinks flexibilisation can contribute to this in an adapted higher education landscape in which institutions join forces (see 5.3). If society wants to draw on all talents, reflection is definitely needed on the reinforcement of HBO5 and the role of lifelong learning in higher education.

6.3.1.2 Diversity as a quality indicator

The democratisation of higher education will not be successful until fully-fledged and high-quality diplomas are awarded to relevant numbers of students from underprivileged groups. Support programmes and a good preparation in secondary education benefit all students, but are especially valuable for underprivileged groups within the framework of a successful access to and transition within higher education.

Attention to diversity in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic background and human functioning must be considered as a part of good quality higher education. Diversity should be/become embedded as a culture in the institution. This means it should be incorporated as a self-evident policy at all levels of the institution.

The Vlor has been insisting for some time on a uniform registration of the participation of underprivileged groups in (higher) education. This is the only way to establish an evidence-based and Flanders-wide (higher) education policy.

6.3.1.3 Open access to higher education

The transition from secondary to higher education contains three elements which by themselves are not questioned by the Vlor but which, when combined, form an actual bottleneck for the institutions of higher education:

- The legal universal validity of the diploma of secondary education;
- The educational expectation that there is a certain connection between the initial competences in higher education and the final competences in secondary education;
- The societal expectation that the open access to higher education is filled in as efficiently as possible (which means with as little drop-out as possible).

One of the concrete consequences is that the actual inflow in higher education is very heterogeneous. On the one hand, the institutions concerned are compelled to respond to this heterogeneity. On the other hand it is unrealistic to expect them to eliminate all differences in order to make the transition successful.[7] Good orientation is essential in this respect. However, the idea is not to evolve towards a selective access to higher education.

6.3.1.4 Study cost

Currently the study cost is still an obstacle for certain students to start higher education. Study cost refers to more than study funds alone. A lot of indirect costs (transportation/digs, material, living cost, postponed salary, …) make studying expensive. The Vlor strongly recommends a constant monitoring of these costs and an evaluation of the scholarship system. Scholarships should be able to cover these expenses and be optimally used for those who actually need it.

A specific obstacle or cost are the efforts adults must make in order to combine their work and/or family life with higher education. Workers receive a financial incentive from the Government of Flanders in the form of training vouchers they can use for a higher education training programme. However, systems such as paid educational leave, training leave and time credit, which may strongly influence lifelong learning, are not adapted to higher education and have not evolved together with the above-mentioned educational reforms of the past decades. They therefore urgently require reform. What is needed is an integrated system to replace initiatives that have been put in place separately by various authorities.

In the financing system, institutions with a high number of scholarship students are insufficiently compensated for the loss of income.

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[7] Flemish Education Council, General Council. *Advies over de studiekeuze naar het hoger onderwijs*, 28 January 2010.

6.3.2 Culture of participation

6.3.2.1 Participation as a need

The Vlor believes in higher education using democratic structures because this benefits the quality and the societal mission of higher education (see 5.3). Decisions taken with participation of different voices, create a democratic learning community. This increases the chance of supported decisions but also the chance of innovative ideas and proposals. For students, participation in policy also offers the advantage that they acquire and exercise competences they will be able to use in their role of critical citizens. Through their commitment, they play an exemplary role for other students. From an educational point of view, an activating, student-centred form of education is created in which all partners consult with each other.

6.3.2.2 Which form of participation?

Participation of students and collaborators (internal stakeholders) is needed at all policy levels, but especially so at the level that is closest to the student. At this level, participation leads to stronger commitment and better results. This form of participation must be/remain guaranteed by Flemish Parliament Act. Participation of what are called external stakeholders must obviously be provided as well.

Whether participation or co-government is the best option strongly depends on the context, on the institution's culture. Co-government has the advantage that partners can weigh on the decision-making process. The question is whether they can remain sufficiently critical with regard to the policy.

Representatives of students and staff should be able to keep in touch with their rank and file. That is why it is important that the diversity of the population is reflected in the representation. This is insufficiently the case today. Representatives should have the opportunity to professionalise in organisation, communication and negotiation techniques and should receive sufficient logistic support.

Participation cannot be effective unless it is put into practice, instead of remaining a merely formalised matter. All partners (both staff and students) must be aware of the importance of participation, and must assume their responsibility. Institutions and students/staff have their (shared) responsibility.

6.4 Funding

6.4.1 Continuous investment in higher education

Flanders has the ambition to develop into a knowledge region (see Flanders in Action, Pact 2020). This requires a permanent and growing investment in higher education. The Government of Flanders makes valued efforts to achieve its part of the 3% standard for research and development - and it has to pursue them with unabated energy. Similarly, but separately, a catch-up plan should be drawn up in order to take (private + public) expenditure in higher education to

2% of the gross regional product (cf. European objective). Flanders achieves 1.2%, whereas the Scandinavian countries achieve 1.8%, Korea 2.3% and the VS 2.9%.[8] Both efforts cannot be at each other's expense. An ambitious Flanders must pursue both standards.

6.4.2 Catch-up operation

Above all, a catch-up operation is needed for the first flow of money of the higher education institutions. The resources they can use for their educational mission have seriously eroded as a result of different mechanisms (under-indexation, research overhead and exponential increase in junior researchers), while the tasks and expectations at educational level have increased to an important degree. This situation becomes untenable if we want to see the new policy accents (democratisation, competence-based education, internationalisation, ...) introduced in the policy of the higher education institutions.

6.4.3 Which funding system?

The resources for higher education must remain guaranteed by the government.

The current funding mechanism contains a number of incentives for the participation of underprivileged groups in higher education. However, it is unclear whether these incentives have had sufficient impact. The imminent integration will also influence the funding of the institutions. That is why the funding mechanism needs to be evaluated.

The Vlor recommends a strong first flow of money. The funding mechanism must be fair, support democratisation and make sure that high-quality higher education can be provided. The funding mechanism must also contain sufficient incentives to maintain differentiated institution profiles. With the current funding model, institutions are inclined to choose the same policy priorities. As a consequence, they all evolve towards an identical profile.

6.4.4 Study funds

In Europe there is a large heterogeneity in the study funds paid by students. In some countries in Western Europe, the enrolment fee is considerably higher than in Flanders (for instance in England, the Netherlands, France and Italy), whereas in other countries (such as Austria, Denmark, Finland and Norway), no enrolment fee has to be paid (European Commission, 2012). It is difficult to make general conclusions on the basis of these international data, since every country has a very different context. This context is determined by the higher education system, the contribution and the mechanism of government financing and the system of scholarships.

More and more people are suggesting to raise the enrolment fees in Flanders. The Vlor recommends making this theme the subject of a thorough debate. The increase of enrolment fees should be examined in coherence with the government financing for higher education, the system of scholarships and the actual study cost. Differentiation and societal corrections should in any case be maintained and improved.

Thanks to the Internet, we are getting used to acquiring a lot of information very easily and free of charge. Higher education institutions offer an added value when they support and guide students

[8] Flemish Education Council (Higher Education Council) and Flemish Council for Science Policy. *Onderwijs: kiem voor innovatie*, 27 May 2008.

to use this information intelligently and to transform it into sustainable knowledge and competences. This means students should be able to meet each other there, and to cooperate, conduct experiments and make an appeal to thematic experts who know how to guide the study process in the 21st century. It is to be expected that, just for this added value only, students will remain prepared to pay study funds and that our higher education institutions will be able to keep a competitive advantage over providers of integral on-line education.

7 Final conclusions and 15 recommendations

In the past years, several memorandums were written about the long-term policy of higher education. In 2008 the Flemish Council for Science Policy and the Vlor jointly formulated a number of recommendations for the further development of higher education, in order to allow Flanders to grow into a high-quality knowledge region.[9] At European level, reference can be made to the policy memorandum of the European Commission *Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems* (European Commission, 2011). As the title indicates, this memorandum starts from the question as to how higher education may contribute better to the economic prosperity in Europe. The same perspective can be found in the recommendation 'Differentiëren in drievoud' of the Dutch Commission 'Toekomstbestendig Hoger Onderwijs Stelsel', the so-called Veerman Commission (Veerman, 2008). According to that commission, the quality of higher education must improve considerably and rapidly if the Netherlands want to be among the top 5 of the most competitive economies in the world.

Like the above-mentioned policy memorandums, this recommendation of the Vlor is based on the conviction that higher education takes up an important place in our current society, and on the concern that higher education should continue to take up that place in the 21st century. What is specific about this recommendation, however, is that it is not only based on economic trends. It also takes into account broader global evolutions and presents a sustainable vision that guides the higher education policy.

The Vlor updates its previously formulated general vision on higher education (see 5) in three aspects:

- the learning activities and the self-organisation that characterise high-quality and dynamic higher education;
- the assignment of higher education to train young people and adults who contribute to a prosperous and sustainable global society;
- the role of higher education in the further development of a democratic society.

The Vlor summarises its points of attention for the Flemish higher education policy in 15 recommendations:

1 **Cooperation professional - academic**
The institutional higher education landscape is being thoroughly redesigned by the transfer

[9] Flemish Education Council (Higher Education Council) and Flemish Council for Science Policy. *Onderwijs: kiem voor innovatie*, 27 May 2008.

of the academic programmes of the colleges of higher education[10] to the universities. The Vlor recommends systematic consultation and cooperation to the benefit of a whole of accessible professional and academic training programmes in which inflow and transition are self-evident. Cooperation must be possible within a stimulating structure.

2 **Create independent bachelor and master programmes**

The Vlor believes that there are still many possibilities at master level for the development or transformation of training programmes, with the work and test forms appropriate for that type of education. For the masters, focus can be placed on increased diversity in the finalities, a better provision for lifelong learning and a better alignment to the professional practice and/or research. The outflow at bachelor level should not be reserved for the professional training programmes but should also be made possible in practice for the academic training programmes.

3 **Developing the entire higher education sector**

In order to welcome all talents in higher education and reinforce the number of highly-educated people, attention must also be paid to the further development of HBO5 and the positioning of the doctoral programme. Cooperation between HBO5 and bachelor, between bachelor and master, master and the doctoral programme should be self-evident. HBO5 and the doctoral programme need structural resources to realise their specific objectives through adapted work forms. Valorisation for the labour market is a crucial factor for further development for all higher education training programmes.

4 **Investing in on-line higher education**

The Vlor asks from both the government and the institutions to systematically invest resources in and focus on the development of on-line education. This type of education, whether or not in the context of blended learning, can strongly increase both the accessibility, the productivity and the quality of the training programmes.

5 **Stimulating research-based, student-centred and interdisciplinary learning**

A structural provision of educational training must exist for teachers in higher education. In Flanders as well, the creation of bachelor programmes with an integrated programme in the humanities and the exact sciences, and aimed at students who perform above average, must be considered.

6 **Reconsidering the concept of the academic year**

The Vlor advises the higher education sector to reflect upon the concept of the academic year with a view to an optimal support of student-centred and activating education, a growing number of lateral entrants and an increase in on-line learning. The Vlor also recommends a clear period between two consecutive academic years without regular courses and examinations. As an alternative to the classical resit in August/September, resit periods can be organised at the end of a semester or module. The period without education or examinations between two academic years can be used for (international) summer schools.

7 **Providing a broad education for the 21st century's competences**

The Vlor advocates training programmes that pursue a good balance between direct employability on the labour market and sustainable growth competences. The latter category concerns communication, cooperation, digital literacy, citizenship, creativity,

[10] The higher arts studies , both the professional, the academic and the higher vocational training courses, were organised into autonomous Schools of Arts that come under the colleges of higher education. The academic nautical training courses continue to be organised by the "Hogere Zeevaartschool".

solution focused thinking and productivity. For certain sectors, a strong alignment to the labour market may be necessary, but this should not lead to training programmes with a very narrow orientation. All higher education training programmes must offer the student an attitude for lifelong learning, but higher education must also respond to the competences of lateral entrants.

8 **Stimulating societal commitment**

Higher education must enable its students to become committed citizens. The Vlor asks institutions to organise a structured provision for students who want to take up a societal commitment. The Council does not exclude the possibility of allocating credits for this.

9 **Responding to societal challenges in the institution's policy and curricula**

Higher education institutions must respond to societal trends. The Vlor is of the opinion that the institutions can autonomously determine which challenges they explicitly include in their policy and curricula.

10 **Integrating internationalisation in the curricula**

Internationalisation is not a purpose in itself, but rather a means to develop the competences that are needed to function in a globalising society. The Vlor strongly recommends that the internationalisation of the curricula become an explicit point of interest during the visitations, accreditations and institutional reviews. Quality marks for internationalisation thus become superfluous according to the Vlor.

11 **Reinforcing partnerships with the South**

The Vlor recommends partnerships with institutions in developing countries, on the condition that they are realised on the basis of equality. The realisation of *brain circulation* is a priority. The partner countries must benefit from sending and receiving teachers and students.

12 **Guaranteeing strong teacher training programmes**

The Vlor insists on the fully-fledged inclusion of all teacher training programmes in the Flemish Qualification Structure (VKS). It must be examined how the teacher training programmes can be made attractive for young people from all layers of society. They must also remain/become accessible to adults who want to take in-service or retraining courses to become a teacher. In particular, the Vlor asks that attention be paid to attracting young people and adults with a strong scientific background to the teacher's profession.

13 **Avoiding unnecessary obstacles towards higher education**

The Vlor is not in favour of additional, separate selections for the access to higher education. It does recommend the elimination of the great differences between students in their initial competences, by means of good orientation and increased effective guidance for their transition from secondary to higher education. The Vlor believes that diversity contributes to high-quality higher education. The Vlor has been insisting for some time on a uniform registration of the participation of underprivileged groups, so that the diversity policy can be pursued in an evidence-based manner. It suggests that the government closely monitor the study cost, so that scholarships can be used in an optimal manner. The Vlor believes the increase of enrolment fees should be the subject of discussion, but recommends to organise this debate thoroughly, against the background of government financing for higher education, the system of scholarships and the actual study cost. The Vlor insists on the review and revaluation of systems such as paid educational leave, training leave and time credit, to the benefit of an integrated system that significantly facilitates lifelong learning in higher education.

14 **Realising democratic participation**

Participation of teachers, students, collaborators and external persons is needed at all policy levels, but particularly at the level that is closest to the student. The Vlor demands that this be/remain guaranteed by Flemish Parliament Act. The Vlor points out that the diversity of student population is insufficiently reflected in the representation. The Vlor proposes that student representatives be supported in order to professionalise them for the accomplishment of their tasks.

15 **Guaranteeing sufficient funding**

In order to realise all these ambitions, the Vlor recommends a catch-up operation for the first flow of money of higher education institutions. The funding mechanism must contain incentives for differentiated profiles of the institutions.

8 Literature list

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