

To Ministry of OCW (VO, MBO and HBO),
Chairman and members Committee OCW and KR of the Dutch Parliament.

Cc Board GvP school, Sint Eustatius,
RCN/department of OCW (on both Bonaire and St. Eustatius),
Education Inspectorate,
National Ombudsman,
Government commissioner on Sint Eustatius.

St. Eustatius, March 16, 2021.

In a way, I am happy to be part of the Dutch population. In just about every ranking in which a country can emerge, the Netherlands is in the top-so-and-so (say: top ten). I think of the happiest people as well as the country with one of the best education systems in the world. I am now abstracting from recent developments such as a declining reading level. A relatively large proportion of the Dutch population is highly and even university-educated, and children generally start school at the age of four. In short, on average we are happy and well-educated people when you compare that to the rest of the world.

Is this finding evenly distributed in the Netherlands? See, that's where something goes wrong! And in this writing I would like to look at the Netherlands as consisting of two parts: European Netherlands and Caribbean Netherlands (where Caribbean Netherlands counts as the aggregate of the islands of Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius). More specifically, I focus on St. Eustatius: I live there.

The last havo year on the island was in 2019. Since last year, students have been leaving the school with, at most, the CSEC diploma. The level of the CSEC depends on the package of subjects it is based on. And despite attempts to define profiles in it that are similar to the profiles as the law in the European Netherlands prescribes for secondary education there, the Dutch Central Government is leaving the English-speaking part of the Caribbean Netherlands to muddle along a bit.

The Besluit CXC in progress ¹ leaves schools on Saba and St. Eustatius free to pick the subject package themselves and whatever is picked, the Minister reassuringly states: "*admission to HBO is guaranteed as long as a certain minimum level of subjects is met*". A child can see that when, out of a multitude of about thirty subjects (from which one can choose at CSEC level), five have to be chosen, there are a great many possible combinations (to be somewhat accurate: more than one hundred and

¹ Well, it's not there yet. The second cohort of students leaving the school will take their final exams in about two months, but the official regulation that should give substance to this is still not in place. Those responsible will say that there are temporary regulations and that is true, but that is only to disguise the fact that the past six years (!) have apparently not been enough to get a sound piece of legislation out of the starting blocks.

forty thousand). And that not all of them are equally suitable for following a HBO study in the Netherlands (for which a HAVO diploma with CM, EM, NG or NT profile is usually required) seems logical to me as a result. The politicians and civil servants at the Ministry of OCW seem to have difficulty following the logic of this reasoning.

But then, worrying about those few pupils (*who are also Dutch, by the way*) from the tiny islands some seven thousand kilometers away from The Hague seems to be asking too much. Yesterday evening there was some information at school about studying in (among others) the European Netherlands. I was there and was somewhat bewildered. On behalf of the government (Department of Education, Culture and Science, Caribbean Netherlands) it was indicated that you had better focus on studying in the region or elsewhere because European Netherlands is difficult. For a continuation at MBO level there is virtually no choice in the English language, so you must have a reasonably good command of Dutch. I can understand that. But for a continuation at HBO level, there is, in principle, enough choice in the English-speaking domain. So reality is not as black as the future was painted. Examples were cited of last year's enrollment at the Fontys in Eindhoven not going smoothly. The interference of the Caribbean department of OCW was at best reactive; the 'first aid for enrolment problems' I took in hand myself at the time.

And by 'reactive' I mean responding to the existing situation which, of course, was also foreseeable. When the ministry in The Hague does not send out any information to HBO-institutions concerning the CSEC-courses of newly enrolled students, then you can of course wait for the problems to arise. I am not convinced that the HBO and MBO institutions have been informed in the meantime, because this year students will again apply (and perhaps even already have done so).

It is not just because of COVID19 that CSEC's grades and diplomas will be late. On the contrary, this is a structural issue. Even under normal circumstances, the results of the exams that are taken just before the summer vacations are not known until around September. So HBO and MBO institutions must take this into account. For that reason, as soon as the results are in, the students receive a school diploma. That diploma is defined in the CXC Decree in preparation, so if HBO and MBO institutions continue to ask the candidate for an original diploma and an original list of grades, then this school diploma with list of grades should suffice (unless of course these institutions are not informed, which I do not exclude, given the experience of last year).

So, instead of (Caribbean) Dutch students being able to take advantage of one of the best education systems in the world, they are advised to start later in the year, or only a year later, or to look elsewhere. Without immediately pulling the discrimination card, I wonder how easily our (Statian) students are deterred from studying in European Netherlands? Does the term 'second class citizen' apply after all...?

And although the Ministry of OCW itself is not directly responsible for this, it would help if they also support the setting up of the entire chain (for the Caribbean Dutch student). I am referring here to the fact that it would be desirable if the Caribbean Dutchman could apply for a BSN and a Digid from the Caribbean Netherlands, as well as an account number at a Dutch bank. It greatly facilitates the introduction of the Caribbean Dutch student in the European Netherlands when applying for study financing. That the health insurance as offered by ZVK to the Caribbean Dutch student who will study in the European Netherlands is not effective, I will not explain in more detail in this letter (I have already informed the VWS domain about this). For that, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport should make (more) efforts.

In short, to date I am not very enamored with the activities of the Dutch government in a broad sense to also help the Caribbean Dutch student to study in a welcome way.

May I ask you to make your contribution to improve all this. Each of you of course from your own specific responsibility:

- The Ministry of OCW (whether or not through the Commission OCW):
 - establish profiles within the CSEC on a legal level;
 - informing HBO/MBO institutions in the European Netherlands of the existence of the CSEC and the value of the school diploma.
- The Ministry of the Interior (whether or not through the KR Committee):
 - leading it there - together with other ministries/commissions, e.g. Fin and VWS - that the rest of the 'chain' is also closed (BSN, Digid, NL-Bank, health insurance).

Kind regards,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA,
Bellevue Road 4, Upper Round Hill,
St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean.
E j.m@jhtm.nl