

## Binary systems: the great divide?

The binary nature of the Dutch higher education system has been a subject of debates as long as it has existed. Through time, politicians, policy makers, institutional leaders and researchers have discussed the pros and cons of the partition of the system into a university sector and a *hogescholen*<sup>2</sup> sector (see for example Mc-Daniël, 1985; Hulshof *et al.*, 1993; Goedegebuure, 1992).

The term ‘binary’ emerged in the 1970s to indicate that a higher education system is divided into two sectors. At that time, the British system was often referred to as an example of the binary model. Starting at the end of the 1960s, the British higher education system consisted of, on the one hand, a relatively autonomous university sector, and on the other hand, a predominantly publicly controlled sector of higher education (polytechnics, colleges), distinct as regards control and research function. In spite of distinctions between the two British sectors, the sectors overlapped strongly in their educational functions (Teichler, 1988, p. 62).

The latter observation is important, because the notion of a binary system does not automatically imply that particular features make the sectors distinct. Often the distinction is associated a restriction of the research function to only one side of the binary divide and a distinction between academically-oriented programmes and professionally-related programmes, but this is not always the case. In addition, in some systems have distinctive admission and selection procedures and distinctive lengths of programmes in the two sectors, and other systems do not. Historical contingencies (such as the perceived need to provide relatively cheap professionally oriented programmes, as was the case in Britain and the Netherlands; or the perceived need to ‘adjust’ to European developments, see also below) played and still play an important role in determining the ways in which the sectors of higher education should be different.

A second observation concerns the dynamics of higher education structures. The emergence of a binary system does not imply that the distinctions will or can be maintained forever. Analyses have pointed out that governmental policies and other environmental influences, as well as organisational strategies and behaviour, have an impact on the relationships between the different sectors (binary or otherwise) of higher education systems. Notions like academic and vocational drift have, for example, been used to describe the tension between sectors and sketch developments of homogenisation or the blurring

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<sup>2</sup> We will use the term *hogescholen* for the Dutch higher professional education institutions and *hogescholen* sector or HBO sector (HBO stands for *hoger beroeps onderwijs*) for the set of *hogescholen*.

boundaries between sectors. The formal demise of the British binary system as well as the emergence of the Australian unitary system can be seen as examples of structural dynamics. Also the development of Master's degrees at Dutch *hogescholen*, the naming of *hogescholen* in international contexts (the *hogescholen* may use the name of 'universities of professional education') can be seen as evidence of these dynamics.

Not only the blurring of boundaries is at stake. A number of governments recently created binary structures in formerly unitary systems (Finland, Austria) or upgraded 'underdeveloped' non-university sectors – e.g. through amalgamations and integration – to become more equal partners to the university sector (Norway, Hungary). In other systems, the restructuring of the higher education system (binary, unitary, or otherwise) is a serious issue on the political agenda (e.g. South Africa) (see Goedegebuure *et al.*, 1991; Meek *et al.*, 1996; File and Goedegebuure, 2000).

### The Dutch policy context

A number of issues have contributed to the debate on the binary system in the Netherlands in the late 1990s. Two important elements will be discussed below. One element emerged from a development in the Dutch system itself, another is related to an international phenomenon.

For years, there have been clear examples of higher education institutions on both sides of the binary divide which have intensified co-operative activities, even in a structured way (sharing buildings, developing joint curricula, etc.). Previous Ministers put forward the idea of mergers between universities and *hogescholen* (Minister Deetman in the 1987 *Schets betreffende de toekomst van het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek [Tweede Kamer 19 914]*; Minister Ritzen in the first note on the draft Higher Education and Research Act, WHW), but the idea was never effectuated. The present Minister, Hermans, announced in the most recent draft of the Higher Education and Research Plan (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 1999), that universities and *hogescholen* would be allowed to engage in administrative mergers, provided the standards and characteristics of academic and professional education were not harmed. The recent announcement must be taken seriously for two reasons. First, the idea has hardly received opposition from the higher education field – in fact, some universities and *hogescholen* have already achieved far-reaching forms of co-operation – and, secondly, the preparations for developing the legal design have started. Although the consequences of the announcement and the implementations cannot yet be evaluated, it is clear that challenges those involved in higher education to re-open the debate on the structure of the Dutch binary system.

The second issue which has contributed to the debate on the binary system is totally different and is related to developments in Europe as a whole. Although there is no regulatory pressure to adjust higher education systems to European trends and standards (if there are such trends and standards at all), there are some indications that governments anticipate the growing importance of Europe. Several governments have indicated that structural

changes in their higher education systems have been inspired by the idea of not wanting their systems to deviate too much from European ‘trends’. This argument can, for instance, be deduced from Finnish and Austrian policy documents which introduced the *Ammattikorkeakoulo* (AMKs) and *Fachhochschulen*, respectively.

Even more than the vague notion of Europeanisation, the recent Bologna declaration (1999) has emphasised the importance of structures of higher education systems, at least in the Netherlands. The Dutch Minister has supported the idea of structuring the higher education into two cycles: Bachelor and Master degrees. The Education Council (2000) has recently released its advice on the implementation of the Bachelor-Master system in Dutch higher education. Although the Education Council is of the opinion that the proposed changes will not affect the overall structure in the short run, it remains to be seen how and to what extent the introduction of the Bachelor-Master system will affect the binary system in the long run. A working group of the HBO Council (2000), for instance, stated in its advice to the HBO Council Board that given the international developments with respect to the Bachelor-Master structure and the issues of international transparency, it is appropriate to reconsider the usefulness of the binary divide.

## Research questions

The explanation above has made clear that the binary situation – and more generally the structure of the higher education system – are currently hot topics of discussion in the Dutch context. At the same time, it can be concluded that the binary situation is not typically a Dutch phenomenon. In international contexts, those involved in higher education also struggle with the question of which ‘model’ provides an adequate structure to deal with the problems and situations that the respective higher education systems are confronted with. The examples given made clear that at different moments different answers have been given to different questions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of a new sector next to the universities was often supported by referring to the increasing costs of the university sector confronted with increasing student numbers. It was anticipated that the new sector would be able to prepare students better and more efficiently for specific professions. Present-day elements of globalisation and internationalisation possibly require other solutions regarding the structure of higher education systems.

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy (*Adviesraad voor het Wetenschaps- en Technologiebeleid*, AWT) would like to be informed about the developments regarding (binary) structures in other higher education systems as a background for policy-making and forming an opinion concerning the Dutch situation.

These two organisations therefore commissioned CHEPS to map the situation and recent developments regarding (binary) structures in a number of European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The objective of the pro-

ject is twofold. First, to describe analytically the state of the art with respect to (binary) structures in the systems mentioned, or more generally formulated: which structures in higher education and boundaries between current sectors or organisations exist? By taking this somewhat broader perspective and choosing a focus on boundaries, we are able to include not only 'pure' binary systems (e.g. Austria and the Netherlands), but to include also relevant situations in other higher education systems in which other boundaries between sectors or higher education organisations are operative. A second objective is to reflect on how the findings relate to the (policy) developments in Dutch higher education.

#### The structure of the report

Following this introductory chapter, a summary of the findings will be given in chapter two, including a comparative analysis. The state of the art and the developments in the higher education systems will then be described in more detail per country. The information given for each country will be divided into the following sections: introduction (general composition of the system), input (access, nature of inflow), structural characteristics (programme length, degrees, professional versus academic programmes, intermediate qualification, research, doctoral degrees, co-operation between sectors), other system characteristics (finance, regulations, personnel, quality management), output ('appreciation' by the labour market), developments ('tensions' between sectors, Bologna declaration) and conclusion (position of the system *vis-à-vis* the Dutch higher education system).