

Letter of 28 August 2018 from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to the House of Representatives on equal opportunities and placement discrimination in secondary vocational education (MBO)

Secondary vocational education (MBO) delivers the newly qualified skilled workers that businesses urgently need and who are such a vital part of Dutch society. It offers young people with a wide range of talents the chance to develop their full potential, allowing them to progress in stages to higher levels of MBO training with better job prospects and after MBO level 4 (middle-management training), move on to higher professional education (HBO) if they so wish. What sets MBO apart in the world of education is its focus on giving young people opportunities to make the most of their talents and lay a solid foundation for the rest of their career.

Furthermore, good-quality work placements and jobs combining working and learning are essential so that students can learn in a workplace setting and further discover and develop their talents, ensuring they are well-equipped for the labour market. Work placements are also an important step towards their first job. Accordingly, every MBO student deserves a fair chance of getting a good-quality work placement. That is why I regard discriminatory practices in placement selection procedures as totally unacceptable. I cannot understand, especially in view of the current shortages on the labour market, why some employers are deliberately excluding certain groups of young people from work placements. I am committed to creating an inclusive society and emphasising the importance of diversity in the workplace, together with all the partners involved.

The inquiry from Lisa Westerveld (member of parliament for the Green Left Alliance) on 7 March 2018¹ about the number of reported instances of placement discrimination has prompted me to combine the presentation of my current strategy for equal opportunities in MBO (see part 1 of this letter) with my strategy against placement discrimination (see part 2).

Part 1: Equal opportunities in MBO

A student's background and ethnic origin should not be allowed to affect their educational success or their opportunities on the labour market. Every student should be able to develop their full potential, regardless of their background, their

¹ House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 31 524, no. 358.

parents' level of education or their financial resources. That is why I am making every effort to boost equal opportunities in education, with a focus on:

- (1) progression within MBO – the possibility of obtaining consecutive certificates at progressively higher levels;
- (2) progression from MBO to HBO; and
- (3) progression to the labour market.

Obtaining MBO certificates at higher levels

A large proportion of MBO students are already progressing to more advanced levels of vocational training. Almost one-third of them obtain more than one certificate, either at different levels or at the same level in different subjects. This shows that MBO schools are providing opportunities for students to move sideways and upwards on the education ladder. It is striking that students with a non-Western migration background more often attain multiple certificates than students in other categories.² Information from the Inspectorate of Education shows moreover that more students are currently getting qualifications at levels 3 and 4 than in previous years. This is due partly to the admissions procedure, with more students being admitted to courses at these levels, and partly to their previous education and training: many have completed the theoretical or combined theoretical and vocational programme in pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO). However, the Inspectorate's findings also show that ethnic background and parents' level of education play a major role in students' level of study. The percentage of students with a disadvantaged and/or non-Western migration background is particularly high at MBO levels 1 and 2, and relatively low at MBO level 4 (and in higher education).³ I view this as a matter of concern because job market prospects for those qualified at levels 1 and 2 are generally poorer than at levels 3 and 4.

My aim is that everyone should have maximum scope to develop their full potential. To this end, I am introducing a range of measures. For instance, under the Early Application and Right of Admission (Secondary Vocational Education) Act,⁴ anyone who is motivated to take an MBO course must be given the opportunity to do so and develop themselves further. I am also changing the way MBO schools are financed.

² See the 2018 education report *De Staat van het Onderwijs 2018* by the Inspectorate of Education, House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 34 775 VIII, no. 130.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Under the Early Application and Right of Admission (Secondary Vocational Education) Act, students are automatically admitted to their chosen course of education or training provided they meet the statutory admission requirements.

Specifically, I am ending the system in which a school receives progressively less funding the longer a student takes to complete their course. This will give schools greater financial scope to create equal opportunities for all students by enabling them to gain successive qualifications or transfer to a different course in order to boost their job prospects. In addition, young people and working people will always have the opportunity to do a government-funded MBO course later on in life.

Progression from secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO)

About 38% of students with an MBO level 4 certificate transfer directly to a course of higher professional education (HBO).^{5,6} For many, the transition is difficult, and they struggle to find their way socially and academically. Almost 20% of students with an MBO background drop out of HBO in their first year. In addition, 30% of MBO-qualified students with a non-Western migration background switch to a different HBO course in their first year, compared to 13% of other MBO-qualified students.⁷ This is a matter for concern: students with the capacity for HBO are dropping out or switching courses for reasons that have no educational basis. On the one hand, MBO schools could prepare their students more effectively for HBO and help them get more out of career orientation and guidance.⁸ Equally, HBO institutions (*hogescholen*) could do more to help MBO leavers settle in during their first year of study. MBO leavers themselves could also explore their higher education options more effectively. To support these efforts on all sides, the government is investing in a smoother progression from MBO to HBO, with an extra focus on students from disadvantaged or non-Western migration backgrounds. Our investments are chiefly aimed at implementing plans developed last year by the MBO-HBO Studentlabs. These ranged from improving the image of MBO to preparing students more effectively for the HBO curriculum. In autumn 2018 the government made an extra €7.35 million available for this purpose.

Progression to the labour market

Vocational education prepares students for jobs at junior practitioner level. Besides this focus on equipping students for the labour market, vocational education should

⁵ *Monitor beleidsmaatregelen 2017–2018* [Policy Measures Monitor 2017–2018], ResearchNed, 2018.

⁶ My letter to parliament on accessibility and equal opportunities will elaborate on the progression from MBO to HBO. The House will receive this letter before the budget debate.

⁷ See footnote 5.

⁸ See footnotes 2 and 3.

also contribute to students' personal development and foundation skills for higher education. Ensuring equal opportunities in MBO automatically ensures equal opportunities for a smooth progression to the labour market. In comparison with other EU countries, a relatively high percentage of Dutch MBO leavers aged between 20 and 34 find a job within three years.⁹ So relatively speaking, the job prospects are already quite good, but there is still scope for improvement.

To make this possible, students must be well equipped to enter the labour market. It starts when they move from pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) to secondary vocational education (MBO). Information on job prospects relating to their preferred course, and career orientation and guidance (LOB) help students make good educational and career choices. LOB includes job taster sessions and teaching students to network. Students and school managers in secondary and secondary vocational education jointly launched the LOB Agenda¹⁰ in 2017, aimed at helping students to make better informed choices with regard to further education and training and prepare more effectively for the world of work. The LOB Expertise Project has been set up to support implementation of the LOB Agenda.

Many young people also need guidance in their initial contact with employers. Citizenship education and guidance from the school before and during workplace training are an important part of this. At MBO level 2 in particular, there is considerable variation in labour-market prospects and in the extent to which young people are capable of making unsupervised initial contact with employers. According to the MBO Macroeconomy Committee (CMMBO), one-third of MBO level 2 students are capable of making a well-founded choice for a particular course. Approximately the same proportion opt for an MBO level 2 course with the intention of then going on to further education or training. However, the remaining one-third are very uncertain about which course to choose, in large part because of their young age, which means they fail to take sufficient account of their job prospects and cannot foresee the consequences of their choice.¹¹ This last group is inadequately equipped to make a solid start on the labour market: they need a different approach from the moment

⁹ See footnotes 2, 3 and 8.

¹⁰ House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 31 524, no. 340.

¹¹ *Arbeidsmarktperspectief mbo niveau 2* [Job prospects for MBO level 2 leavers], CMMBO, 2017.

they enter MBO. With this in mind, a number of providers of MBO level 2 courses are trying out broader-based programmes to also prevent dropout.¹²

It is also a fact that young people with a non-Western migration background often choose courses with poor employment prospects, for example in the field of business and commerce. They often have an inaccurate picture of what certain occupations entail, or may be set on getting an office job. So career orientation and guidance, especially in terms of personal guidance and giving students a taste of the world of work, remains extremely important if we want to increase young people's prospects of a good job and a promising future.

To this end, MBO focuses on helping students to choose a training course with good job prospects. VMBO has already tested ways of improving work exploration (taster placements and company visits) and getting parents more involved in their children's choices. The LOB Expertise Project publishes the lessons learned and makes them available to all secondary and MBO schools. Key features include greater employer participation, a broader picture of individual occupations, and support for schools that want to get parents more involved in career orientation and guidance.

I will also work on monitoring students after they leave MBO. In response to the motion by members of parliament Peter Kwint and Zihni Özdil, a pilot project will start in the 2018/2019 school year in which young people who attain their entry level or MBO level 2 certificate will receive guidance during their first two years on the job market. Some 20 regional registration and coordination centres (RMCs) and institutions applied to participate in the pilot, eight of which have been selected.¹³ The Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO) will conduct a thorough evaluation, so that we can learn as much as possible from the pilot and adapt our policy as and where necessary.

During the 2017 budget debate Labour MP Kirsten van den Hul asked me, with a view to a smooth transition of MBO students to the labour market, about the scope

¹² In autumn 2018 René van Gils (former chair of the Graafschap College school board) will publish his initial findings, outlining what the broader-based programmes should entail.

¹³ The eight RMCs are: Start.Deltion and Landstede Groep in association with RWB Regio Zwolle and Leren & Werken (RMC regions IJssel Vecht and Noordwest-Veluwe), RMC Noordoost Brabant, the municipality of Amsterdam (RMC regio Agglomeratie Amsterdam), RMC Zuidoost Drenthe, ROC Rivor (RMC region Rivierenland), Stichting Clusius College (RMC regions Kop van Noord-Holland, West-Friesland and Noord-Kennemerland), Friesland College/Students Service Centrum (RMC region Friesland Noord) and MBO Rijnland (RMC region Zuid-Holland-Oost).

for a central government traineeship programme for MBO students. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has said that the Central Government Strategic Human Resources Policy up to 2025, about which she recently informed the House, helps promote equal opportunities for MBO students. One of the focal points of this policy¹⁴ is that recruitment will specifically target potential candidates for the civil service who are still in education, including MBO students. Accordingly, central government will present itself as a potential employer at an earlier stage in MBO and HBO institutions and at universities. The aim is a more lasting connection with students, so that once they are ready to enter the labour market, they are already acquainted with central government as a potential employer. Central government has over 400 placement providers where MBO students can do workplace training and simultaneously experience what it is like to work for central government. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations will explore ways in which these placement providers can raise their profile on the central government online job platform werkenvoornederland.nl. I will explore the same question with the Centre for Cooperation between Vocational Education and Training and the Labour Market (SBB) for stagemarkt.nl, the website where young people can look for placements and jobs combining working and learning. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations will also take measures to boost the participation of MBO students in the government-wide work placement networks. For my part, I will seek to increase central government participation in the pilot project on orientational company visits (see also the next section of this letter). This pilot could be helpful for young people who have difficulty finding a good placement.

To continue fostering equal opportunities in the future, I have made an agreement with the MBO sector that equal opportunities in education will be one of the three national priorities. MBO schools thus have an opportunity to incorporate this theme in their own quality agendas. Finally, I believe it is vital for young people to participate in the dialogue about equal treatment and equal opportunities. I am pleased that in the forthcoming school year, the youth organisation for vocational education (JOB) will tour the country to publicise equal opportunities in education and will visit eight MBO schools in November 2018.

Part 2: Tackling placement discrimination

¹⁴ House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 31 490, no. 243.

For MBO students to be well equipped for the labour market, workplace training (referred to below as ‘placement’)¹⁵ is crucial. Students are required to spend a considerable part of their training in a workplace setting. Placements teach them to discover and develop their talents and also constitute an important step towards their first job. Every MBO student therefore deserves a fair chance of getting a good-quality placement that matches their capacities.

Research shows that MBO students with a non-Western migration background have to write more application letters and spend more time looking for a placement before they eventually succeed.^{16,17} This is underpinned by recent figures from a survey of MBO leavers by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) (see Figure 1).¹⁸

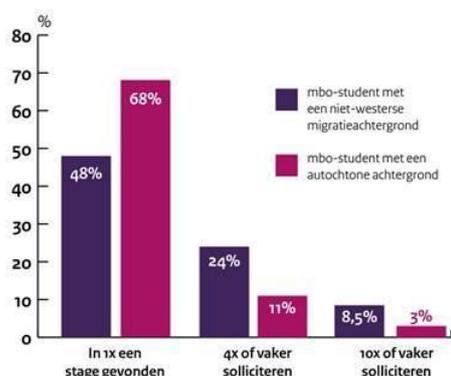


Figure 1: Number of placement applications by MBO students

[Vertaling tekst in figuur 1:

mbo-student met een niet-westerse migratieachtergrond = MBO students with a non-Western migration background

mbo-student met een autochtone achtergrond = Ethnically Dutch MBO students

in 1x een stage gevonden = successful after 1 application

¹⁵ MBO offers two distinct learning pathways: block or day release courses (BBL) and school-based vocational training (BOL). BBL students have a job contract with a business, where they do all their practical training. BOL students spend most of their time at school and do one or more placements with different companies or organisations. Young people with a minority ethnic background are much less likely to opt for the BBL pathway than young people with an ethnically Dutch or other Western background. This letter therefore focuses on BOL, since the majority of students with a non-Western migration background opt for this route and also tend to enrol in courses with significantly poorer job prospects.

¹⁶ Rooijen & De Winter-Koçak, *Gelijke kansen op gelijke stages* [Equal opportunities for equal placements], 2018.

¹⁷ *Schoolverlaters tussen onderwijs en arbeidsmarkt 2014* [School leavers between school and the labour market, 2014], ROA, 2015.

¹⁸ The survey of school leavers was conducted jointly by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the ROA. The figures refer to students who obtained an MBO certificate in the 2015/2016 academic year and took part in the 2017 Adult and Vocational Education (BVE) Monitor.

4x of vaker solliciteren = successful after 4 or more applications

10x of vaker solliciteren = successful after 10 or more applications]

When these data are differentiated for the two learning pathways, approximately 18% of BBL students with a non-Western migration background submitted four or more applications before getting a placement, compared with 7% of ethnically Dutch students. Of the BOL students with a non-Western migration background, 24% submitted more than three applications before getting a placement, compared with 13% of ethnically Dutch students. Girls who wear a headscarf and boys whom employers believe will 'cause trouble' appear to be particularly affected by this (often unintentional) form of discrimination.¹⁹

I regard placement discrimination as unacceptable. It deprives young people of opportunities to which they are entitled. It can diminish their self-confidence and cause them to feel unsafe. It is also incomprehensible, especially given the current shortages on the labour market, that employers are by default excluding certain groups of young people from work placements and jobs. By denying them these opportunities, employers are leaving this potential untapped,²⁰ particularly as students with a migration background living in and around the Randstad conurbation currently account for a major part of the relatively small number of young people entering the labour market. In research by the Knowledge Platform on Integration and Society some of the employers interviewed acknowledged that discrimination occurs.²¹ There are also employers with a migration background who find themselves functioning as a safety net for students who cannot find another placement.²² Besides discrimination on the basis of a migration background, we should not forget the existence of other, equally unacceptable forms of discrimination, based for instance on sex, age, sexual orientation and disability.

¹⁹ Klooster, Koçak and Day, *MBO en de stagemarkt, wat is de rol van discrimination? Een verkenning onder onderwijsprofessionals en studenten*, [MBO and the placement market: what part does discrimination play? A survey among education professionals and students], 2016.

²⁰ Sometimes students may be rejected for other reasons, such as not meeting the requirements. In this letter I stand up for young people who are not given a chance, intentionally or otherwise, because of prejudices.

²¹ A number of the employers featured in the study are committed to ensuring a culturally and ethnically diverse mix of placement trainees. This is a very positive development, which I believe deserves mention here.

²² See footnote 16.

Discrimination is not always reported by students, placement supervisors or MBO schools. For instance, research shows that some students and supervisors appear to be turning a blind eye to the problem. When an MBO school picks up signs of unfair treatment in the workplace the response is often to look for an alternative placement rather than report the suspected discrimination. Turning a blind eye to discriminatory practices is unacceptable. Whenever there are signs of discrimination, the school must support the student so that they feel they are being taken seriously. It can also be helpful to create a setting (away from the classroom) where students can talk about their experiences. Even if the discrimination cannot actually be proved, it is still important for students that the matter is discussed.²³

In addition, MBO schools sometimes choose to place students with a non-Western background with employers from a similar background.²⁴ I find this deeply regrettable, because it deprives students of the opportunity to gain experience at different types of businesses. In addition, businesses run by employers with a non-Western background tend to be smaller and therefore cannot always offer the student sufficient scope for development. This may adversely impact their labour market position by the time they are ready to find a job.²⁵

In tackling placement discrimination, I am looking to dovetail my approach – as requested by Zohair El Yassini (member of parliament for the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD)²⁶ – with the policy of Tamara van Ark, State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment, as set out in her letter entitled ‘Labour-market Discrimination Action Plan 2018–2021’,²⁷ which the House of Representatives has already received. Under the Further Integration on the Labour Market (VIA) programmes, experiments are being conducted with employers to develop, log and investigate human resources interventions in order to reduce the influence of prejudices (whether subconscious or not) in recruitment and selection. Methods include improving initial introductions through video applications or working visits, various ‘blind application’ procedures and online selection tools. These HR interventions should eliminate conscious or subconscious prejudices from staff and trainee selection procedures.

²³ Van Kapel & Bellaart, Kennisatelier ‘*even sterk op de stagemarkt*’ [Workshop for knowledge development and exchange: ‘Equally strong on the placement market’], 2016.

²⁴ See footnote 17.

²⁵ See footnotes 16 and 22.

²⁶ House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 31 524, no. 358.

²⁷ Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 29 544, no. 834.

Jointly with the Secondary Vocational Education Council, I am supporting the Equal Opportunities career orientation and guidance project, in which 15 MBO schools are given support to better assist students (especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds) in developing career competences, finding suitable placements and preparing for entry to the job market. The project also addresses the problem of placement discrimination and the scope for MBO schools to tackle it. In another pilot project,²⁸ I am looking to see whether orientation visits or brief introductory visits to businesses can help improve young people's prospects on the labour market. In the 2018/2019 school year, the aim is for 250 young people to go on orientational company visits.

The Centre for Cooperation between Vocational Education and Training and the Labour Market (SBB), whose responsibilities include the appraisal and approval of placement providers, organises workshops to teach its consultants how to recognise and deal with various forms of discrimination. Training is also available for placement providers themselves, such as the Selection without Prejudice workshop developed by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (CRM), which aims to raise awareness of conscious and subconscious prejudices and stereotypes among employers and HR managers. The desired outcome is unbiased recruitment and selection, so that everyone has a fair chance when applying for a placement or a job.

In summary, it is vital that every form of discrimination should be reported and action taken. Students, parents and teachers can contact the SBB's own reporting office. The House has specifically asked me for information on the SBB reporting office and how many instances of placement discrimination have been reported.²⁹

A total of 17 instances were reported to the SBB's placement discrimination reporting office between 1 July 2017 and 30 June 2018. If a discrimination claim is well founded, the business in question loses its status as an approved placement provider. This has already happened to one placement provider on the grounds of proven discriminatory practices that were reported to the SBB, so that students can no longer do work placements there. The placements of the students still working there were ended. Their MBO school and SBB will arrange an alternative placement for

²⁸ The pilot project on orientational company visits is a joint venture between the SBB, the Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment, MBO Services and Utrecht University.

²⁹ House of Representatives, 2017–2018 session, 31 524, no. 358.

any student who had not completed the required minimum number of hours of workplace training.

To date, then, the number of instances reported is fairly small. In the 2018/2019 school year, therefore, I will work with the SBB to get a clearer picture of what it could mean for students to report possible instances of discrimination, and also to raise awareness of the reporting office among students and schools. Young people will be reached through a social media campaign that will incorporate the experiences of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights with its social media campaign *#ikwildiestage* (*#I want that placement*). Besides highlighting the importance of reporting discrimination, we also want to make it easier for students to report incidents, anonymously or otherwise.

In conclusion

Everyone in the Netherlands has a right to fair treatment and equal opportunities in education, including a work placement. A student's background and ethnic origin should not be allowed to affect their educational success or their opportunities on the labour market. That is why, in partnership with Arie Slob, Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media, I am making every effort to boost equal opportunities in education.

As Mr Slob and I indicated in our policy response to the 2016/2017 Education Report, we are committed to making equal opportunities a reality. Schools and course providers must provide clear information on opportunities and good-quality, accessible education. It is then up to young people to take up the opportunities that exist. Parents' income or level of education should not make a difference. Everyone has talents and should be given the chance to develop them further. Sometimes that means getting a second or third chance, or taking an alternative route. Achieving equal opportunities in education and an inclusive society will take many years. But it is a process to which I am wholeheartedly committed in collaboration with all the partners involved.