

## Netherlands

**Population:** 16.3 m. **Fertility rate:** 1.75. **GDP per capita:** USD 9 000. **Children under 6 years:** c. 1 000 000.

**Female labour force participation:** 69.2% of women (15-64) participate, 60.2% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 15.1%).

**Labour force participation rate of women with a child under 6 years:** For mothers with children under 6: 71%, are employed and make up 79% of part-time employment (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005); for mothers with children under 3: 66.4% work (EUROSTAT); 60% for two-parent families, 39% for single parent families.

**Remunerated maternity and parental leave:** 16 weeks of maternity leave paid at 100% of earnings, plus additional unpaid parental leave of 6 months for parents who work at least 20 hours.

**Average duration of parental leave:** 4 months.

**Compulsory school age:** 5 years.

**Social expenditure:** 21.8% of GDP (2001). **Child poverty rate:** 9.8% after taxes and transfers (UNICEF, 2005) (OECD average is 11.2%).

**Funding of pre-primary educational services (ISCED Level 0):** 0.38% of GDP (0.37% public and 0.01% private), 7.5% of education budget with 10.6% of enrolments.

**Unit cost per child** (in USD converted using PPP): USD 4 923 (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005).

**Type and funding of services for children under 4 years:** Since 2004, child care has changed from a supply-side system funded by (local) government to a market system funded by government (tax credits), companies and parents. The level of funding is not available.

**Average costs to parents:** For child care services as a whole c. 44%. Depending on income, the range of contribution is 3.5% to 100%.

**Legal entitlement to a free service:** At 4 years. No entitlement to child care.

**Major service types and duration:** Day nurseries providing full day care for the work year for children from 3 months to 4 years; pre-school playgroups offering developmental activities to young children generally on a sessional basis, but sometimes full-day; pre-primary education for 4- to 6-year-olds on a half-day basis for the academic year; out-of-school care (OSP) for 4- to 12-year-olds during the work year; child minders (family day care), sometimes supervised by agencies, who provide care to children from 0-12 years either in their own home or in the child's home. Except for child-minding, all these services may be provided at one site in multi-functional community schools.

**Rate of access to regulated services:** Children 0-3 years: 22.5%; 2.5-4 years: 89%; 4-6 years: 100%. Most services are part-time or are used part-time.

**Designation and qualifications of key staff:** In child care, most directors of centres have an HBO (4-year tertiary award). Other staff have an SPW-3 (a 3-year vocational training in general social-pedagogic work) or an MBO (senior secondary level vocational qualification of 2-3 years). A further possibility is an SPH, vocational training specifically focused on developmental challenges and family dysfunction. Pre-primary staff are teachers with a 4-year tertiary diploma from primary teacher training colleges, specialised in teaching of 4- to 8-year-old children.

**Child-staff ratios:** Children 0 years: 4:1; 1-2 years: 5:1; 2-3 years: 6:1; 3-4 years: 8:1; 4-12 years: 10:1.

**Maximum group size:** Average group size in registered child care 0-4 years: 12:1; average group size in primary education 4-7 years: 20:1, 8-12 years: 27.7:1.

### Auspices

ECEC policy and provision in the Netherlands has traditionally been a shared responsibility between national, provincial and local governments. The national government takes on those tasks that can be more efficiently organised at national level, e.g. legislation, rules and regulations, developing policy frameworks, formulating national standards and attainment targets, promoting innovations, national monitoring and evaluations of quality. It is not clear yet how these functions are affected in the new deregulated system of child care (see below).

At central government level, three ministries have had major responsibility for young children: the Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment; the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS); and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) is responsible for the whole educational system, including access, equity and quality for all young children from 4 years onwards. Since 2002, the Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment is responsible for child care policy, including the recent Child Care Act (2005). The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) has responsibility for the Welfare Act which includes pre-school playgroups for 2- to 3-year-olds. Child care and out-of-school provision are located, however, at local authority level, with some collaboration – particularly in the case of child minder organisation – at regional level. 90% of local authorities organise these services. The Ministry of VWS is also responsible for youth health care.

Primary education, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (OCW), includes children from 4-6 years (compulsory schooling begins at 5 years but children remain in the early years cycle up to 6 years). Freedom of education in the Netherlands means that school boards (public or private) are equally funded when they subscribe to the Primary Education Act. Choice of staff, teaching materials and pedagogy is a school level responsibility. In addition to the different levels of local government, other major bodies are expected to play a role in decision-making and implementing early childhood policy, viz. the employers, unions, parents, youth and professional organisations.

A fundamental change has taken in the child care sector under the present government which has placed child care firmly in the field of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW).

## Context

*Labour force rates:* In 2004, the labour participation rate for women aged 15-64 was 69.2%, increasing from 52.4% in 1990. Of those, 60.2% work part-time, while 15.1% of men work part-time (OECD, *Employment Outlook*, 2005). In 2004, only 26.2% of women 15-64 years were in full-time paid employment, while 68.1% of men of the same cohort were in full-time, paid employment. Instead of the “two-times three-quarters” work share between men and women announced during the first OECD review in 1999, a “one-and-a-quarter” arrangement has emerged as the dominant pattern (OECD, *Babies and Bosses*, 2002). Mothers with a youngest child under 6 years had an employment rate of 71% in 2002, and constituted 79% of part-time employment (OECD, *Society at a Glance*). In 2004, mothers with children under 3 had an employment rate of 66.4%.

*Parental leave:* 16 weeks (4 months) parental leave at 100% earnings is available, plus additional unpaid, partial leave of six months (if parents work at least 20 hours per week), a regulation among the lowest in European Union countries. Family-friendly work policies have been introduced, with initiatives to bring flexibility into the length and timing of work hours.

## Access and provision

Three “circles of provision” have been created around the child and family: i) general provision for young children aged 0-6 years; ii) interventions towards families and children who need special attention; and iii) specialised or intensive forms of help for children with special education needs (SEN). General provision includes child care in centre-based day nurseries for 0-4 years (generally full-day for the work year), family day care for children of 0-12 years old (full-day for the work year) and out-of-school care for the 4- to 12-year-olds (sessional services for the work year provided in 90% of municipalities). Kindergartens, pre-schools and pre-primary education services operate either half- or full-day for the academic (school) year. Two-thirds of schools are privately managed, but all are fully publicly funded. Each type of provision has its own aim, background, funding system and governing structure.

### Rates of provision

*0-4 years:* Whereas in 2001 22.5% of these children were in services, in 2003 access and usage of the registered services had increased to 29%. Most children remain in the care of parents, assisted by close family<sup>1</sup> and partial use of different services. From 2.5 to 4 years, some 89% of children in this cohort are engaged in child care, playgroup or early learning services, a 9% increase since 2001. Playgroups are the most popular form of provision for 2.5- to 4-year-olds in the Netherlands. They are usually established by private bodies with the legal status of foundations. Many of these foundations are independent; others are part of a larger co-operative structure, frequently a child care organisation or general welfare foundation. Children usually visit the playgroups twice a week (2-3 hours per visit) to play with their peers or participate in an intervention programme.

*4-6 years:* Pre-primary education is an integrated phase of education within primary education or the basic school. Compulsory school age is 5 years, although from the day children turn 4 years they can be enrolled, free of charge, in a primary school. Dutch parents welcome early education and enrol 98% of all 4-year-olds in pre-primary classes where children are present 4 to 6 hours daily.

In 2003, out-of-school care services were accessed by 14% of pre-schoolers, double the proportion achieved in 2001.

### *Children with diverse needs*

*Children with disabilities:* 5% of children 0-6 years are reported to have organic disabilities. With a growing awareness of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC, more children are being integrated into mainstream services (80%). 20% of this designated group are in special services. Subsequent special education is well funded, though often apart.

*Children from low-income families:* The child poverty rate is 9.8% after taxes and transfers (UNICEF, 2005). Low-income families are supported in various ways, for example through the scheme for subsidising child care costs for (single) parents on low income or welfare support. This enables the parent to train for re-entry to the labour market. Ethnic minority groups are over-represented in this category.

*Ethnic and bilingual children:* The immigrant population is significant in the Netherlands: 12% of children between 0-5 years are from ethnic or bilingual backgrounds, mainly concentrated in the large cities. 25% of children 0-6 years are considered to have particular educational needs originating primarily from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. Youth Health Centres reach almost all families with an infant. Hence, they are given the task of identifying children and families with social risks and guiding them to services such as ECEC programmes for children at risk. Where schools manage a certain percentage of children from lower SES or from ethnic minority groups, additional funding is provided to recruit additional staff, either to lower the group size or ensure specialist assistance. Large investments have been made in both sectors to improve general quality and to integrate more effectively children at risk.

Current Netherlands policy aims at 50% participation of these children in ECEC programmes from 2.5- to 6-year-olds, additional funding being made available for this purpose since 2000 (EUR 110 million since 2002). This funding is not to support the basic provision. Rather, it is to increase the child-staff ratio (15:2 in pre-school, playgroup and the primary years 1 and 2), double the hours spent by at-risk children in pre-school playgroups, and ensure trained staff and professionally designed programmes in special pre-school classes for disadvantaged children 2.5-4 years old, such as *Kaleidoscope* (based on *High-Scope*), and *Pyramide* (based on *Success for All*). Government and local authorities make important investments in social integration and targeted educational programmes.

## **Quality**

Within the context of the new Child Care Act, the quality control mechanisms employed previously in the Netherlands, especially by municipalities with regard to child care facilities, are no longer operational. According to SZW:

*The new Act no longer prescribes specific quality requirements in relation to the child care centre. This allows the sector more room to determine its own regulations in order to ensure that child care facilities satisfy the legal requirement to provide responsible child care. Operators must make an inventory of safety and health risks themselves. They must also be able to demonstrate that they pay attention, among other things, to the number of children per supervisor, the size of the group and the educational background of staff members.*

Furthermore, the child care centre operator may only deviate from the advice of the Parents' Committee if he/she provides a written explanation for doing so.

With the Child Care Act, the minister wishes to stimulate the transformation of the child care sector into a sector with greater scope for market forces and to provide parents with more freedom of choice. By reducing the number of regulations, the administrative burden on operators will decrease, something which could also have a favourable effect on the costs of child care.

*Licensing and regulatory regimes:* In January 2005, local policies on child care quality were replaced by the general regulation in the new Child Care Act requiring basic standards on health and safety, information to parents, and attention by providers to certain fundamental quality indicators. In future, basic quality standards are formulated through self-regulation in the form of a covenant between providers organisations and the parents organisation. A parent board is required to support and monitor progress and the local municipality is responsible for regular health and safety inspections. In the education sector (provision for 4- to 6-year-olds), quality control is ensured by the school inspectorate, which undertakes systematic and holistic analyses of whole schools, noting in particular the ways in which schools give account of their pedagogical policy to parents.

*Funding:* Expenditure on pre-primary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP is 0.38. Some 96.7% of this expenditure came from public sources and 3.3% from private sources including 0.6% parental contributions (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005). According to the latter report, 7.5% of total expenditure on educational institutions is allocated to pre-primary whereas 10.6% of the children/students are enrolled at this level of education. Fees for 0-3 services are primarily set by the market whereas services for 4- to 6-year-olds are within primary education and free of charge. The funding of child care is a mix of public and private. Private provision is primarily for-profit and public provision is provided predominately by other bodies subsidised by government.

Unlike most other countries, employers in the Netherlands are important stakeholders in child care, either setting up their own child care services or, more usually, purchasing or renting "company places" in child care centres. Under the new Child Care Act, public subventions are directed primarily to parents. Parents contribute 44% of overall costs to the child care system as a whole. Individual levels of contribution (between 3.5% and 100%) depend on household income under the new child care law of 2005. Government expenditure on ECEC has expanded from EUR 617 m in 2003 to EUR 800 m in 2005, the growth being related to the growing use of child care.

The new Child Care Act has reformed the funding system. "Demand-side funding" provided to parents by the central government and employers replaces the previous "supply-side, operational funding" provided by the municipal authorities to services. According to the SZW Web site:

*The Child Care Act provides for a new method of financing child care. The bill assumes that parents, employers and government collectively bear the costs of child care. The expectation is that in 2005 68% of employees will be able to receive a contribution for child care from their employer. The target figure is 90% by 2008. The government will give partial compensation to parents who do not receive a contribution from their employer. From 2006, the compensation scheme will be gradually dismantled. From 2009, only parents with an income of up to EUR 45 000 will retain the right to partial compensation.*

Through the Tax Department, parents will receive directly the amount that the government contributes to child care. The direct subsidising of facilities will cease as a result. Child care facilities will compete in terms of price and quality, since parents will be able to opt for a different care establishment if the price is too high or if the quality is found wanting. In sum, child care organisations will increasingly be subject to market forces.

*Staffing and training requirements:* Children in registered child care services for 0-4 years and out-of-school care services for 4+ years are cared for by a variety of providers and staff. ECEC workers in contact with children are required to have, in principle, a higher professional qualification, either an HBO for directors (four-year tertiary, non-university qualification) or an MBO for other staff (a senior secondary level, vocational education qualification of 2-3 years). For playgroups the quality regulations, including staff qualifications, are set by the municipalities. In the education sector, teaching staff are trained for four years in the PABOs or primary teaching training colleges as polyvalent teachers who can work in the entire 4-12-year age range. They take, however, a specialisation for either the age group 4-8 years or 5-12 years. Regardless of what class they teach, all teachers are now paid at equal rates.

*Work conditions:* The status of staff, almost wholly female, has traditionally been low, particularly in the day care and playgroup sector. There have been acute recruitment problems and staff shortages, but efforts are now being made to address the issue through raising wages and improving secondary labour conditions. More attention is being given to investment in multi-functional accommodation so that more integrated services might be achieved. This gives increased opportunity for staff to work across two types of provision, for example by working as a classroom assistant during school hours (appointed by the school board) and as an out-of-school carer after school hours (appointed by the local child care service). These combined jobs are stimulated by three policy interventions: a) co-financing incentive funds; b) harmonising labour conditions; and c) integrating training programmes.

*Child-staff ratios:* In the new Child Care Act, no child-staff ratios have been fixed. The Act speaks simply of “well-considered care”. This implies that child care should contribute to a sound and balanced development of children in a safe and healthy environment. The Act stipulates some concrete quality regulations, such as risk assessment of child centres, the use of Dutch language and the establishing of a parent council, as well as global quality requirements, which include group size. Two national child care organisations and the lobby-organisation for parents in child care have made the criteria for quality more concrete through a quality covenant. In principle, these agreed quality criteria will become a basis for inspection and the monitoring of quality.

*Curriculum and pedagogy:* National curricula do not exist in the Netherlands at any level of education. However, a co-ordinated curriculum effort has been made over the past decade to improve the quality of early childhood education for 2.5- to 6-year-olds from low SES and ethnic minority backgrounds. Two curriculum programmes have been validated for use (*Pyramide* and *Kaleidoscope*) and a third programme is under evaluation. A group of expert advisors work with teachers across the Netherlands to determine effective pedagogies for children from these backgrounds. In addition, the expert centre for teaching the Dutch language, *Expertise Centrum Netherlands*, developed protocols in 2004-05 to improve mastery of the Dutch language within validated curriculum programmes. Many municipalities also have policies to raise the awareness of parents about the importance of ECEC for their children.

*Monitoring, evaluation and research:* Monitoring processes for family day care and crèche under the Child Care Act involve registration by the municipalities and annual health and safety checks. Public pre-primary education monitoring is more substantive, requiring in addition curriculum standards, in-service training and regular pedagogical supervision by an accredited supervisory body. Investment in information systems management is also progressing in education, and results are expected from the introduction of a “pupil number” in the education system. This identifier will enable tracking of the progress of each child through their school career, the resulting generalised data pool enabling review of achievement, disaggregated by particular categories – for example, gender, SES, special needs. This system records the child’s antecedent experience of ECEC services and will be fully operational in 2007. Linkage of this data system to a targeted research and evaluation plan is being considered.

*Parent and community involvement:* Parent engagement is promoted both in policy and programming. A special campaign was launched in 2002 to inform and stimulate parents from ethnic minority groups to enrol their children in pre-school playgroups, especially in playgroups that offer intensified and quality programmes. Preventative health care programmes also guide parents towards the use of ECEC services. The new Child Care Act requires all provisions to have a parent board.

### **OECD policy issues**

Among the issues for policy attention identified (in 1999) by the OECD review team were:

- *Coherence and co-ordination of services:* During the early years of decentralisation, the co-ordination and coherence of the system were often stretched in terms of management, training and categorisation of personnel, equitable access and quality control.
- *Understandings of childhood and early education:* During the early 90s, ECEC was mainly seen from a protection and care angle. Progress is being made, particularly in playgroup and early primary school provision, where a number of improved educational programmes have come on stream. However, the institutional division between care and education still remains, leading to quite separate treatment of infant/toddlers and “pre-primary” children.
- *Greater support to parents:* The funding of Dutch ECEC services relies heavily on parents in terms of fees, opportunity costs and daily time devoted to children, a contribution borne in particular by mothers. The review team recommends further attention to gender issues. A reduction of costs to parents may also be necessary, particularly to encourage greater use of services by low-income parents. The parental contribution to child-rearing could further be supported by expanded maternity and parental leave and the provision of more out-of-school care.
- *Staffing and training:* Imminent staff shortages may be explained by a combination of factors, but within the care sector, relatively low status, uncertainty about career paths, poorer work conditions and wages, are issues that merit attention.

### **Developments**

The Child Care Act heralds a shift in direction for ECEC service provision in the Netherlands. This Act brings in a demand-driven system where parents buy child care in

the market and the central government supports the demand by offering a means-tested subsidy. In addition, employers are expected to pay one third of the costs of child care for their employees. The supply of services will be at the discretion of market forces, but no doubt, targeted programming sustained by public funding will be continued. It is evident that this new experiment in the organisation of child care will be watched closely by other OECD countries.<sup>2</sup>

Another development in the Netherlands has been better collaboration between schools and youth care institutes. At the national level, marked division of responsibilities for child care, education, youth health care and pre-school playgroups remain. The appointment of a High Commissioner for Children and Youth Policy in late 2003, by the ministers who share responsibility for children and youth policy, has brought down some of the legislative and administrative barriers encountered by local policy makers in their efforts to offer children more cohesive services. In the coming years, the High Commissioner for Children and Youth Policy will advise the government on measures to be taken in order to offer families and children a smooth and high quality continuum of services in early care and education.

Another striking feature of Dutch early childhood policy has been the further development of research and the intensive trialling of new curricula and programmes. A number of such programmes, including intensive pre-primary early education programmes, have been mainstreamed to the advantage of children both in school and pre-school services.

Dutch attention to diversity and equity issues has also continued. The education sector, in particular, continues to do excellent work in providing educational programmes for ethnic and disadvantaged young children before they enter pre-primary education. The time may now be ripe to bring playgroups and pre-primary schools together. As suggested during the first OECD review, governments in the future may wish to consider bringing child care centres, playgroups and pre-primary together into one universal system that ensures, with equity, continuity of care and education for all children.

## Notes

1. According to data for 2003, 35% of young children were in (partial) unpaid care by grandparents, 13% in unpaid care by non-family members, 3% in paid care by grandparents, 15% in paid care by non-family members and 5% in formal home care.
2. In Chapter 5 of this text, the analysis of funding modalities suggests that market systems in ECEC tend to generate inequalities of service provision, unremarkable quality, class and ethnic segregation, and the fragmentation of services. This may be due to the newness of the approach, and the inexperience of administrations in creating the necessary safeguards. Although much work has been undertaken in recent years in the United States in trying to control these effects in the marketised parts of the education system, no real solution to these drawbacks has yet been found, except more regulated partnerships between public authorities and providers.