

Developing a university wide policy for increasing flexibility and 21st century skills (0156)

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In June 2013 the Board of Windesheim University, a large polytechnic with about 60 Bachelor programs, in the Netherlands, assigned a project group to develop and implement a new educational concept for the institute, to be based on the question: "What will higher education look like in 2035?" and to inspire teaching and learning for the next eight years. A new vision on education was necessary because of the changes in student diversity with regard to ability, social class and race, combined with the development of learning technologies and the discussion for an appropriate authority of teachers in higher education ([Ashwin, 2005](#)).

The project was divided into five phases. An open research approach with mixed methods was used.

In the paper we will report on the following research questions:

- 1) What will higher vocational education look like in 2035, according to literature, stakeholders within the university and to external experts?
- 2) Which educational concepts can guide the necessary transformation of all the programs of the university towards this future?

To answer the first question, the project group talked with internal and external experts, management and students, read literature, watched a number of documentaries and saw many videos on YouTube. From these sources seven major trends were distilled ([Ashwin, 2005](#); [Bingham, Quigley, & Murray, 2001](#); [Gibbs & Costley, 2012](#); [Lauder, 2009](#)).

- 1 Information is available anywhere, often in bits and pieces. High-quality course material (e.g. through Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs) will be available worldwide. The student will have more options to choose from. The regional higher-education institute will see its monopoly on information dwindle.
- 2 There will be more competition in the higher-education market than is now the case ([Teixeira, Rocha, Biscaia, & Cardoso, 2013](#)). The student will increasingly need to pay for his own studies, which will force him to act more and more as a higher-education 'consumer'. Forced by budget cuts, the government will allocate less and less funds to higher education and research. This means that the collection of funds from private and commercial parties will become more and more important. Reputable knowledge institutes can recruit good researchers and lecturers and possibly differentiate in tuition fees for students (Jongbloed, 2003).
- 3 A university of applied sciences must meet strict requirements to maintain its position in the interplay of forces of mutually competing higher-education institutes ([Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007](#)). It must provide excellent education, conduct high-level practical research in close involvement with the surrounding area and simultaneously have a strong international focus

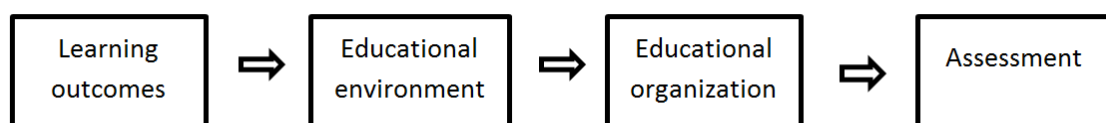
([Montesinos, Carot, Martinez, & Mora, 2008](#)). This is also what the professional field expects from graduates ([Schuiling, 2012](#)).

- 4 Decreasing birth rates will lead to dropping intake rates of students moving straight from secondary education to higher education (WRR, 2013). At the same time, a growth market will develop among adults. The Netherlands is currently falling far behind other knowledge economies when it comes to adult education.
- 5 The target group for higher education will become increasingly diverse in terms of age, experience, prior education and cultural background. The student – school-leaver and professional alike – wants not only a clear structure, but also personalized education, matching his individual desires and circumstances ([Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011](#)). Distance learning, independent of time and location, as well as workplace learning for those who hold jobs, could be promising options.
- 6 The world is changing rapidly and social, cultural and economic developments elsewhere have a great impact on professional practice. Yesterday's 'standard solution' often no longer works, which requires creativity and flexibility to find solutions (together with others) to the often complex problems the professional faces. This means that higher professional education must pay a good deal of attention to innovative skills ([Lutters, 2013](#)).
- 7 Technological developments have a huge impact on education. Students must be prepared not only for the impact of technological developments on their profession, but also for changes as yet unknown. Students and lecturers must be able to assess and deal with the impact this is likely to have on the profession and on society. Education will (need to) use technological developments to promote quality and flexibility.

In order to answer the second research question, these trends were transformed into three imaginative narratives of future students and a document that elaborated on the trends and their influence on higher education.

A few characteristics of education seem to have a more permanent position and will not change. For instance interaction between students and between students and teachers and a high quality of teaching and learning are a permanent fixture. These characteristics were used to support the educational concept. The building phase was used to recognize sensitizing concepts ([Glaser & Strauss, 2009](#)) and to conceptualize the findings ([Engeström, 2001](#)) through focus group discussions within the university, evaluation and drawing.

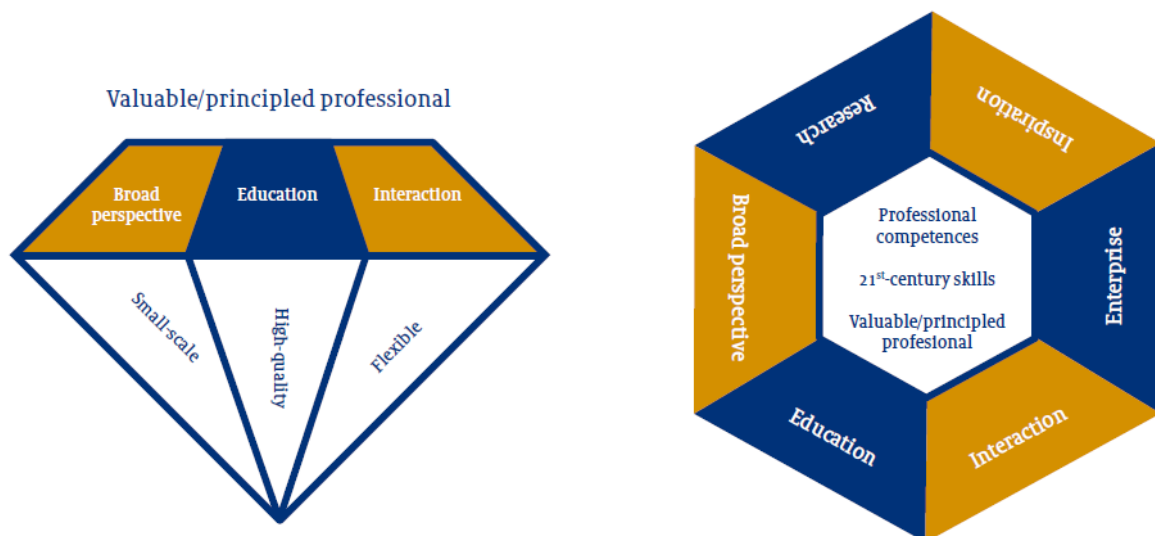
To develop a prototype for the education Windesheim offers, a simple model to describe the consequences of the trend analysis was used.



As a result of the trend analysis and the subsequent discussions with staff and students, the following challenges were formulated as educational development targets:

- 1) Enhanced flexibility of teaching and learning in order to accommodate diversity with respect to age, ability, personal situation (e.g. having a relevant job or not), et cetera.
- 2) Create more inspiring, interactive and creative learning environments.
- 3) Incorporation of working and thinking skills relevant for the future (the so-called '21st century skills').
- 4) Strengthening the fostering of research and entrepreneurship dispositions within students.
- 5) More explicit attention to 'Bildung' and reflection on the value and values of professional skills.
- 6) Less 'top-down' and more 'bottom-up' curriculum design and organization, allowing academic staff members the necessary degrees of freedom.

To communicate these objectives to staff and students of all different programs and to guide further development and implementation, a visual representation in the form of a diamond was created.



At present, various programs have started to redesign their curricula. This process will be monitored through research (two PhD projects have been assigned).

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