

<press release, 22 March 2024>

This is a joint press release from the educational institutions ('MBO', 'HBO', 'WO') in Limburg.

Urgent letter to the Minister of Education and the House of Representatives

Appropriate regulations and international orientation are essential to prevent the devastation of education in Limburg

Appropriate regulations and an international orientation are essential to prevent the devastation of education in Limburg, to maintain education standards and to train sufficient professionals for the tight labour market in the region and in the Netherlands as a whole. Since 2022, Limburg has been among the top 40 of Europe's most innovative regions, according to the European Commission. To remain at the top and take advantage of new opportunities, education in the province needs to be strengthened. Limburg is calling for the scope and appropriate measures to achieve this. In a broad coalition, municipalities, province, employers' and employees' organisations, companies and Maastricht UMC+ are sending an urgent letter today to the education minister and to the parliamentary parties, including the possible partners in a future governing coalition.

At the same time as this urgent letter, the educational institutions of Limburg are sending their own manifesto. Both are clear about the threats to education and the region. Due to an aging population in the region, there is a risk of a sharp decline in the influx of students in vocational education and training (MBO), higher professional education (HBO) and university education (WO). If appropriate measures are not taken, the consequences will be devastating: courses will disappear from the region and thus educational institutions will shrink significantly. This will cause a reverse in the positive developments of recent years, such as joint efforts and investments by educational institutions, companies and governments in innovation and knowledge, for example at the Brightlands innovation campuses.

Necessary measures

Both the urgent letter and the manifesto are clear about what is needed to prevent devastation:

- Education funding by the government provided in such a way that shrinking education programmes remain affordable and available in Limburg, including much-needed technical courses.
- Customised legislation and regulations that enable educational institutions to continue to welcome international talent in Limburg in order to address shortages in the labour market and remain an innovative region.
- *Structural* support for cooperation between the education sector and the regional business community rather than a constant reliance on individual subsidies and tendering schemes that bring high administrative burdens.
- Structural funding of lifelong learning and development programmes by regarding them as part of the public mandate of educational institutions. This will allow Limburg residents to receive the training that is needed in a rapidly changing labour market.
- Better public transport infrastructure within, to and from the region, also to Germany and Belgium.

Due to its location – with two different neighbouring countries and languages just a stone's throw away – and specific demographic, social and economic characteristics, Limburg is the ideal forerunner for a future-proof education system. This can be achieved through new forms of funding

that serve broad regional prosperity and that stimulate cooperation in the chain of education, and connections with social partners and companies.

Disaster scenario averted?

In recent months, the discussion about internationalisation has been largely limited to the influx of international students, especially at universities of applied sciences and research universities. It is now clear that a *rigorous* end to the influx of international students is completely undesirable. With this it seems that a horror scenario has been averted. Indeed, such a stop would be disastrous: if all bachelor's programmes at Maastricht University and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences had to be taught in Dutch, it would lead to a permanent loss of some 4,500 jobs and cause the Limburg economy to decline by almost 1 billion euros. This is evident from calculations by the research agency Panteia on behalf of Maastricht University and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences.

Internationalisation is so much more

International orientation goes beyond the admission of international students. The Limburg organisations are now calling attention to the wider story, viewed not merely from the perspective of central government or the Randstad. Internationalisation is not a problem for a region like Limburg, but a solution. Moreover, the problems that exist elsewhere, such as a serious shortage of housing and student accommodation, and overcrowded lecture halls, do not occur in Limburg. In fact, due to demographic shrinkage, municipalities in the region would welcome more students within their boundaries. As stated in the letter: *"Only 24 per cent of Limburg's border is with the rest of the Netherlands, while 76 per cent is with other countries. This means that we have to look beyond borders to increase the quality of life in the region. Partly due to their location in a border region, educational institutions and companies in Limburg have traditionally had a strong international orientation, and they play an important role in the region. Their contribution to the social, economic and cultural development of Limburg is essential."*

Retaining sufficient international students is also essential for the broad prosperity and quality of life in the region, the letter continues. *"We – regional government, the business community and educational institutions – want to redouble our efforts to retain foreign students in our region after graduation. [...] A strong spectrum of education for our residents is a right that we work hard to uphold. The influx and retention of all talent, young and old, is and will remain indispensable to maintain our region's competitiveness and quality of life."*

Signatories of the urgent letter

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[Limburgse Werkgevers Vereniging](#), voorzitter Ron Coenen

[MKB-Limburg](#), voorzitter Martijn van Helvert

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[CNV Limburg](#), bestuurder Ed Leunissen

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[Brightlands Chemelot Campus](#), CEO Astrid Boeijen

[Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo](#), CEO Ingrid Vermeer

[Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus](#), waarnemend CEO Yvo Graus

[Brightlands Smart Services Campus](#), CEO Walter Pijls

Signatories Education Manifesto:

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