

A call to strengthen the educational landscape of Limburg for the benefit of broad prosperity, quality of life and economic dynamics in the region

Limburg, 22 March 2024

Dear Sir or Madam,

With a view to the formation of a new coalition government, we ask for your attention for the maintenance of a sustainable balance in the international character of our education landscape as a result of our Euroregional location. We see this as a crucial issue that affects the foundations of our broad prosperity, quality of life and economic development.

Recent political debate has been dominated by the issues of livelihood security and future prospects in the regions. We fully underline the importance of these issues. It is precisely for this reason that we view with concern the discussion about limiting the influx of international students rather than seeking a sustainable balance between national and international students. Due to the importance of international students to the educational institutions in this border province as part of the Limburg ecosystem, we advocate customised solutions in border regions. Generic, national measures do not do justice to the diversity in the national educational landscape.

Education is an important foundation for livelihood security and future prospects, not only in our region, but in the Netherlands' border regions in a broader sense. We therefore call on you to take account of regional interconnectedness and the economic importance for border regions in the discussion about the influx of international students.

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. National demographic challenges have a stronger negative effect on the social and economic domain in Limburg, with a decreasing number of young people and an aging population. Due to the border, and the impediments it creates, it is not possible to take advantage of the economies of scale of a larger region.

International students and knowledge workers are integral to this border region and are crucial to alleviate labour market shortages. They help to maintain the quality of our basic services and provisions, such as healthcare, education, public transport and employment. Major developments for the region, such as an Einstein Telescope, not only require sufficient qualified employees, but also a strong, accessible cross-border knowledge infrastructure. This also applies to the developments on the four Brightlands campuses.

We understand that the influx of international students can affect quality of education, local housing, and the funding and accessibility of education for Dutch students. However, these effects vary greatly by region. Border regions cannot be compared with large cities in the Randstad and vice versa. Allow the regions to take the lead and arrive at customised solutions to regional challenges in consultation with central government, and do not opt for generic, national measures.

The quality of our education is not under pressure due to the arrival of international students in Limburg, and the young people of Limburg are not being displaced. We jointly take responsibility for ensuring the availability of sufficient student accommodation, and educational institutions are devoting much attention to the reduction of work pressure. In our border region, international students are simply our students. Students who are indispensable to prevent the deterioration of the spectrum of education available and to ensure that educational institutions have the strength to offer their own employees a pleasant and safe working environment.

Our educational institutions are a driving force within the region and form an essential link in Limburg's ecosystem

Our educational institutions generate almost 13,500 jobs, of which 9,000 are in Limburg. In addition, they provide a total of more than a billion euros in added value, of which 650 million euros in Limburg, with the main focus in South Limburg, at 600 million euros. At the same time, our educational institutions function as an important engine for growth and innovation in our region; they are the beacons of a vital and resilient economy. They contribute to innovation and the retention of employment, not only for knowledge workers, but also much more broadly for jobs for everyone, whether their education is theoretical or practical.

Over the past ten years, with the four Brightlands campuses, Limburg has developed into one of the 40 most innovative regions in Europe. Companies are working hard and with success on the transition to this new and innovative Limburg. They are doing so in close collaboration with vocational education and training (MBO), higher professional education (HBO) and university education (WO). The joint efforts and investments of educational institutions, companies and governments on the Brightlands campuses have led to innovative research and the development of concrete business cases for start-ups and scale-ups. Moreover, the campuses ensure that talent from the Netherlands and beyond can quickly find employment in the region, which means that talent is retained for Limburg and hence for the Netherlands.

The creation of a healthy labour market for the future is a prerequisite for a vital and competitive economy. The possible loss of a substantial proportion of our students will have a negative effect on the Limburg ecosystem. Educational institutions are essential providers of knowledge and suppliers of talent, and their strength is indispensable to continue the current positive developments. This is necessary to eliminate the social disadvantages and lower life expectancy that Limburg still faces.

We – regional government, the business community and educational institutions – want to redouble our efforts to retain foreign students in our region after graduation. Be aware that while we are convinced that the English language is necessary in education, we also go to great lengths to introduce all our students to Dutch. 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.

In short, we offer

- A Euroregional knowledge landscape characterised by (inter)national talent and innovative strength. This is essential for broad prosperity, quality of life and economic capacity in Limburg.
- The potential, in the context of the new internationalisation policy for vocational education and training, higher professional education and university education, and the application of tailor-made solutions for border regions, to provide scope for the development of programmes taught in English, German or French, in order to attract sufficient talent to the region and particularly in sectors with labour shortages.

- The assumption of joint responsibility for the provision of sufficient student accommodation, and great attention devoted within educational institutions to the reduction of work pressure. We are working on Euroregional initiatives and pilots that will serve to retain international and Euroregional talent for our region.

We would like to enter into discussions with you, from the perspective of a border region, with the aim of raising the level of internationalisation in (higher) education in the Netherlands. We would also like to discuss with you the effects of certain aspects of the funding system and see how higher education in Limburg, given its large proportion of borders with neighbouring countries, can remain healthy and make a lasting contribution to the economic and social domain. The retention of international students is not only crucial for Limburg, but also contributes to the prosperity of the entire country.

Yours faithfully,

De Gedeputeerde van de Provincie Limburg, Elianne Demollin-Schneiders,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Heerlen, Roel Wever,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Maastricht, Wim Hillenaar,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Roermond, Yolanda Hoogtanders,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Sittard-Geleen, Hans Verheijen,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Venlo, Antoin Scholten,

De Burgemeester van de gemeente Weert, Raymond Vlecken,

Voorzitter Raad van Bestuur MUMC+, Helen Mertens,

Voorzitter Limburgse Werkgeversvereniging, Ron Coenen,

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CEO Brightlands Chemelot Campus, Astrid Boeijen,

CEO Brightlands Greenport Campus, Ingrid Vermeer,

CEO Brightlands Smart Service Campus, Walter Pijls,

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