

## Education Manifesto Limburg

*Educational institutions in Limburg warn that if education in Limburg is allowed to deteriorate or disappear, the negative economic and social consequences will be immense, and the province's pupils, students and companies will suffer.*

***Make every region count and be aware that only if regulations in education are customised can stagnation in Limburg be prevented.***

Limburg has grown both economically and socially in recent years. After decades of structural disadvantage, government, business and education working in close collaboration have succeeded in lifting Limburg into the top 40 most innovative regions in Europe. To achieve this, we have drawn on Limburg's strength as an international border region. The results are impressive, and now we want to continue. We are expressly asking for the freedom to pursue our course and to work on the development of a region that contributes to the Netherlands from a position of strength. A region that may soon be home to the Einstein Telescope and play a central role in the greening of chemistry.

### *Collaboration, innovation and entrepreneurship*

Limburg's research and educational institutions have joined forces in chains, with regional companies and institutions, and with local and regional government. They are associated with the Brightlands campuses in Limburg: at the Chemelot, Greenport, SmartService and Health campuses, innovative research is conducted and translated into concrete business cases. Research and education are developed in co-creation, and students in university education (WO), higher professional education (HBO) and vocational education and training (MBO) jointly conduct research and practical assignments. A similar development can be seen in other ecosystems in areas such as construction and installation technology, agri-food, logistics, medtech, healthcare and childcare. Together we train knowledge workers and professionals for and through Limburg companies and institutions. We do not limit ourselves only to young people. Jointly, educational organisations are strongly committed to the ongoing advancement of lifelong learning and development. In recent years, many adults have actively retrained at vocational, higher professional or university level to improve their prospects in the labour market. An ecosystem now exists that cannot be limited by national borders, but which has a cross-border and Euroregional presence. In short, in recent years, the educational and research institutions have jointly taken major steps in the multiple use of the research and training infrastructure. Together, excellent propositions have been created for students (both youths and adults), companies and institutions in Limburg. It is important that we are able to continue to develop this in the coming years. This will require support to maintain and strengthen a broad infrastructure for training, education and research in Limburg.

### *Population decline and aging*

Notwithstanding these positive developments, the province also faces significant challenges as a result of demographic shrinkage. The proportion of young people is declining, the population is aging, and young people are leaving the region for study or work due to the pull effect of surrounding regions. At the same time, Limburg has a structural disadvantage in health and general prosperity. By 2025, Limburg will have seen a decrease in the number of 15- to 20-year-olds of approximately 18 per cent since 2017, according to figures provided by Statistics Netherlands. We see the effect of this in the intake figures of our regional educational institutions. There is already a

labour shortage in most sectors in the region,<sup>1</sup> and this situation will worsen in the coming years if no additional measures are taken.

Within the current system, a decreasing number of students also means decreasing funding, which puts further pressure on our education infrastructure, while the shortage in the labour market only continues to increase. Especially in such circumstances, it is necessary to retain and attract Dutch and international students at all educational levels. In the technology sector in particular, we face a challenge in attracting sufficient personnel to meet regional demand, because technological development is an important facilitator in almost all sectors and a necessary factor for innovation in fields such as circularity, energy transition, water management, biodiversity and nature, healthcare transitions, equality of opportunity, and housing. Such degree programmes are predicted to see a decline in intake of more than 30 per cent, which puts pressure on the range of programmes available and means that irreversible measures will have to be taken. Moreover, relatively small courses in important sectors for Limburg, such as leisure and catering, are also under pressure.

Partly in this light, the influx of international students is crucial for us in the border region. It is important to be aware that the problems occurring elsewhere in the Netherlands in relation to a rapidly increasing influx of foreign students do not apply in Limburg. There is no declining quality of education, Dutch students are not being displaced and Limburg is not experiencing a shortage of student accommodation. The educational institutions in Limburg are taking part in the consultations with the national sector organisations to contribute to balancing this influx. We are also taking additional measures to introduce foreign students to the Dutch language and the regional business community in order to increase the probability that they will stay on after graduation, which in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion is already high.

The specific border location between Germany and Belgium poses special challenges. The potential to reach Dutch students is much lower than in most other Dutch cities. In addition, the Euroregional and international student influx and its funding are also being critically examined. Vocational education and training already has to deal with leakage to Belgium. The requirement to offer teaching in Dutch will make it more difficult to attract Belgian or German students. Given the peculiarities of our border region, a choice to require bachelor's programmes to be taught only in Dutch will lead to a particularly large decline in student numbers in Limburg.

#### *An appeal to central government*

It is both necessary for and characteristic of Limburg that we realise a strong, integrated profile of education, research and valorisation in the region in order to train sufficient national and international talent to meet our (Euro)regional needs. The opportunities to develop our border region into the next powerful and internationally competitive knowledge area are there for the taking. We and our government should not miss this opportunity for the region, and hence also for the country.

For this reason, we are calling on central government to act on the report *Every region counts (Elke regio telt)* and not to design policy purely from the perspective of The Hague or the Randstad, or based on the national political discourse. We ask that you pay attention to the impact of the rules and funding structures that result in regions with specific characteristics such as the province of Limburg being disproportionately disadvantaged. Make policies and regulations that offer customised solutions to regions when necessary, and that take into account the fact that both the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.werk.nl/imagesdxa/regio\\_in\\_beeld\\_2022\\_zuid-limburg\\_tcm95-442432.pdf](https://www.werk.nl/imagesdxa/regio_in_beeld_2022_zuid-limburg_tcm95-442432.pdf)

influx and retention of international talent strengthens the spectrum of education available in the regions, as well as regional industry and prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

We wish to provide for a spectrum of educational institutions which in close cooperation and with government support are able to take responsibility for the education of sufficient professionals, practically trained people, specialists and researchers. Geographically, economically and historically we are intertwined with the surrounding countries. Cross-border cooperation and exchange is everyday practice and must remain so to maintain regional vitality. Without the political support to do this, the negative impact on Limburg will be disproportionately large.

Be aware that without support, within a few years in Limburg we will face acute shortages across the entire labour market. The choice to offer bachelor's programmes only in Dutch will be detrimental to the range of education available and put Limburg at an unjustifiable disadvantage. Due to the interconnectedness of education, research and regional industry, this will severely affect the innovative strength of regional ecosystems (including Brightlands campuses) and all their associated companies and healthcare partners.

**Specifically, we ask the government for:**

1. financial scope and stable structural funding to maintain the spectrum of education available, despite the population decline, which will also contribute to the affordability of small courses that are crucial for the region.
2. an exceptional position within the proposed internationalisation policy, with customised solutions for regions with a declining population, and for border regions. This means more room for programmes taught in English, German and French to attract and retain sufficient talent for the region, especially in sectors with a labour shortage.<sup>3</sup> The international context and social needs of our border region should be explicitly taken into account in macro-efficiency assessments.
3. structural funding aimed at cooperation in the education sector and with regional businesses instead of separate subsidies and tendering schemes which bring high administrative burdens. Scope and appropriate funding to develop, together with our (Euro)regional education partners and companies, an innovative range of education that primarily meets regional needs, transcending not only boundaries between institutions and educational levels but also borders with neighbouring countries.
4. structural support for the lifelong learning and development initiatives that we as public educational institutions offer and develop, by making lifelong learning and development part of the public mandate so that we can ensure knowledge retention and employment for everyone.
5. improved public transport infrastructure within, to and from the region (within Limburg, between Limburg and other parts of the Netherlands, and across the borders).
6. the space to consolidate and grow in consultation with our regional, social partners (making long-term rather than incidental investments in regional development and the multiple use of training infrastructure) and the Brightlands Campuses.

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<sup>2</sup> The percentage of foreign students who remain is currently around 30-40% in our region. We would like to increase this, because it is clear how crucial this young talent is at a time in which the population is both aging and declining.

<sup>3</sup> As you are aware, we are working with our sector organisations on a proposal to implement self-management, while also ensuring that Dutch students are not displaced and that international students are retained in the region.

We are happy to take the initiative and jointly take the lead with a powerful regional talent strategy which, based on clear insight into regional needs, is given free rein to attract talent from our own region, neighbouring countries and further afield, and also to retain this talent for the region.

### **Signatories**

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