Summary

Over the past two decades, the concept of demand-driven education has become extremely popular in Dutch Higher Professional Education (HPE). However, although adopted by the majority of Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), thus far, surprisingly little is known about the practice of demand-driven education.

This study has aimed to develop knowledge about demand-driven education as practiced at a Dutch UAS, focusing in particular on the student as an autonomous and rational decision-maker. In addition, the study has also aimed to reflect on the nature of demand-driven education and explain why the concept of demand-driven education has, over the past two decades, been adopted by so many Dutch UASs.

In this study, the concept demand-driven education was reflected upon from an educational, historical and sociological perspective, while the practice of demand-driven education was investigated through a case study at Windesheim UAS, Zwolle. The case study was performed to understand institutional and individual perceptions of demand-driven education, as well as to determine what features characterise student decision making in demand-driven education.

Demand-driven education in perspective

The findings of this study show that demand-driven education is often characterised as a new approach towards learning, whereby learners are able to make decisions or judgments about educational activities, the sequence of these activities, the content of these activities, didactic elaboration, projects in which they will participate and which courses they will attend. Learners also prove in their own way that they are competent and should be involved in the selection of assessment tasks and the interpretation of assessment results. In demand-driven education, the student is able to decide what, when and how learning will occur, whereas the role of the teacher becomes that of a manager, mediator and motivator of learning.

The concept of demand-driven education and its accompanying discourse clearly reflect the Post-modern preoccupation with complexity, a fast-changing world and the ability of the individual to write his or her personal narrative. This contrasts with Modern concepts, such as the liberal arts and the open curriculum, which promote individual autonomy with the aim of challenging the mind of learners to become active, competent and critical individuals and foster a passion for learning. The concept of demand-driven education instead appears to provide influence over the curriculum to prepare students for a lifetime of learning and change.

The move towards demand-driven education seems part of more broader and international trend in publicly funded services. Findings of this study indicate that, around the beginning of the 1980s, the adoption of NPM strategies has given way to a pluralism of structures that would allow for the market-based delivery of publicly funded services. In the Netherlands, this development resulted in the introduction of demand-driven publicly funded services. In a rather similar fashion, the adoption of NPM strategies by higher education institutions has resulted in a more market-like approach to higher education. Consequently an
increasing focus on the customer (i.e., student) perspective can be witnessed, which has resulted in ‘personalised learning’, ‘tailor-made education’ and ‘customised learning’. In the Netherlands, this development has resulted in the adoption of demand-driven education by the great majority of Dutch UASs.

**Perceptions and practice of demand-driven education at Windesheim UAS**

At Windesheim UAS, demand-driven education is defined as an approach towards learning which enables individual students to personalise their curriculum. The ten Schools of Windesheim UAS state that demand-driven education allows their students to personalise the curriculum by exerting influence over the manner in which competencies are acquired in major and minor courses and in on-the-job learning as well by choosing minors to broaden or specialise in a certain area of expertise. Some Schools also enable their students to make decisions about the professional roles they will be working on during their on-the-job learning, the context in which this will take place, the selection and design of (professional) assignments and their learning environment, the content of (practical) assignments, the way in which the objectives of the study programme are achieved and the sequence of courses and modules.

At different Schools, students have to meet different conditions to be able to personalise the curriculum. The extent to which students are able to personalise the curriculum is, for instance, restricted by students’ prior education, the outflow profile of their study programme, the minimum requirements for internships, the fact that choices have to be approved by a supervisor and by options that can only be chosen when they are organisable.

Findings show that, according to students, demand-driven is about: what you really want, becoming more self-governing, finding out what you want to do and becoming more of a generalist. Both teachers and students feel that students have difficulties coping with the freedom that is provided to them and feel that large bodies of students will struggle with their choices. Some teachers therefore expect that students will need much guidance and coaching.

**Student decision making in demand-driven education**

Findings show that although demand-driven education is said to enable students to decide what, when and how learning will occur, at Windesheim UAS, demand-driven education in most cases allows students to personalise the curriculum by choosing a minor, course, module or internship from a fixed set of options.

When students are able to make decisions about which minor, course, module or internship education they will undertake, their decisions are characterised by a very high degree of autonomy and a rather high degree of rationality.

The autonomy of the student decision making process is primarily influenced by the extent to which a student is motivated to engage in the decision making process and a student’s career decision making self-efficacy. Findings further indicate that the autonomy of the decision making process is to a lesser extent influenced by the quality and clarity of the provided information and students’ knowledge of how to get information as well as by knowledge of the enrolment procedure and the complexity of bureaucratic choice structures.

The rationality of the student decision making processes is strongly influenced by the quality and clarity of the provided information and students’ knowledge of how to get information and knowledge of the enrolment procedure as well as by students’ career decision making self-efficacy. The rationality of the decision making process is also influenced by the
knowledge of the self, motivation to engage in the decision making process and to a lesser extent by the support of a student’s career counsellor during the decision making process.

Findings show that the autonomy and rationality of the student decision making positively affects students’ satisfaction with a semester as a whole whereas the rationality of the student decision making process also positively correlates with the constructs behavioural engagement during a semester and a student’s feeling of mastery. However, the evaluation of the autonomy supportive behaviour of the teacher or on the job coach has a much higher correlation with the construct Satisfaction than rationality and autonomy of the student decision making process.

Student decision making is led by epistemic, emotional, functional values, or a combination of two or all of these values. Only in very few cases do social values appear to play a role in student decision making. In none of the cases do conditional values appear to be leading. These findings indicate that when students are able to personalise the curriculum through choices, in nearly all cases, they will choose a minor, course, module or internship because they see it as either new and/or interesting (epistemological), because they think they will like it or because it matches their interests (emotional) or because it will be beneficial for their future career or in their future job (functional).

Findings further show that the shift in power from ‘producers’ to ‘consumers’ of higher education is far from self-evident, as student decision making often involves struggles for power between students and staff members. Staff members, in particular, exercise power through (the withholding of) certain information and the promotion of certain options over others. It appears that staff members use their authority to influence students by giving certain advice and persuading or convincing students to take up a certain minor, module, course or internship.