

**Ministry of Education, Culture and Science**

Attn: Mr. E. Bruins  
PO Box 16375  
2500 BJ The Hague

**Date**

Maastricht, 19 November 2024

**Subject**

Tailored solutions for the Limburg education structure

**Dear Minister Bruins,**

Limburg has a strong international orientation due to its location on the border with Belgium and Germany. For our educational institutions, this means that approximately 70 percent of their target market lies within a radius of 100 to 150 kilometres across the border.

In your recent parliamentary letter on international student flows dated 15 October, you address the tightening of the proposed policy to further restrict the influx of international students. Ahead of the discussion of the OCW-budget, we request attention for tailored agreements regarding the educational landscape of Limburg, as the proposed policy impacts the foundation of our region's prosperity, liveability, and economic development.

**Ecosystems for (Eu)regional talent**

In Limburg, we are committed to fostering broad prosperity through collaboration between government, industry, and knowledge institutions in a cross-border context. To achieve this, we urgently need all available talent within the Euregion. During your visit to Limburg on Friday, 18 October 2024, you gained insight into how we implement this joint approach in practice through various initiatives, including:

1. In our border region, five Euregional educational institutions are collaborating on a trinational curriculum. This approach prepares students from the three language areas within the Meuse-Rhine Euregion for the (Eu)regional labour market.
2. Heerlen is establishing the world's largest Urban Living Lab, focusing on education and research to improve quality of life, in collaboration with Euregional education partners.
3. The Brightlands Chemelot campus in Sittard-Geleen has the innovation labs where MBO, HBO and WO students come together to contribute to the ambition of being Europe's first circular chemistry and materials site by 2050.
4. In North and Central Limburg, efforts are focused on practice-oriented education and research together with regional SMEs to train, retrain and upskill MBO and HBO students and also to promote the flow of MBO students to HBO, for example in the agri-food sector. In South Limburg the emphasis is on the themes of biodiversity, water, and soil.
5. In addition, Euregional educational and knowledge institutions are preparing for the establishment of an Einstein Academy to support the Einstein Telescope project, leveraging Limburg's border location as an opportunity for the province.

All in all, Limburg hosts several hubs for (Eu)regional talent, where supply and demand come together, and cross-border themes are addressed collaboratively with institutions from the Euregion. For businesses, there is a pressing need to partner with strong, internationally oriented educational institutions to attract talent and drive innovation. This collaboration contributes to a solid foundation for the region's socio-economic development and ultimately enhances broad prosperity.

## Demographic challenges

The Draghi Report emphasises that member states must make significant investments in fundamental research, innovation, and education to safeguard Europe's competitiveness. The close collaboration between government, industry, and education has propelled our region into the top 40 most innovative regions in Europe and established it as an innovation leader on the Regional Innovation Scoreboard.

The Province of Limburg continues to position itself as a frontrunner in innovation but faces significant demographic challenges in the coming years, with a declining number of young people and an ageing population. The proposed generic, national measures are likely to have an increasingly negative impact on Limburg's socio-economic and societal landscape.

In the interdepartmental policy study *Talent in the Right Place* published last spring, it was noted that, based on demographic developments, the projected intake of HBO students in Limburg from 2013 to 2033 shows the largest decline in the Netherlands. The Berenschot report on shrinking regions further highlights that investing in collaboration between MBO institutes, secondary schools, HBO institutes, and businesses is essential to mitigate the effects of population decline in sparsely populated areas with long travel distances and to maintain the region's liveability.

Additionally, research by Panteia demonstrates that restricting international students has immediate and significant consequences for both Limburg's educational institutions and the region itself. Specifically, within a single government term, this policy would result in a €1 billion reduction in Limburg's economic output and a structural loss of 4,500 jobs in the region. This situation forces knowledge institutions to halt investments in innovative initiatives in Limburg, severely undermining the region's and the Netherlands' innovative capacity and competitiveness.

When we consider "*Every Region Counts*," the national initiative aimed at improving quality of life, housing, and work in the Netherlands, we observe that the proposed measures do not apply positively to Limburg. On the contrary, the government's plans harm Limburg's economic and social development. The Province of Limburg must look beyond its borders to enhance liveability in the region and address labour market shortages. Situated at the heart of the Euregion, where diverse language areas and cultures converge, multilingual education is essential for seizing Euregional opportunities and fulfilling our role as a bridge to Europe. As a region, we collectively take responsibility for providing sufficient housing and fostering initiatives to improve Dutch language proficiency among students and knowledge workers. We explicitly emphasise that these efforts are undertaken without compromising the quality or availability of education for our Limburg youth.

We – regional governments, businesses, trade unions, and healthcare and educational institutions – strongly urge you, as the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, to take the following actions:

1. Acknowledge regional differences and consider the unique opportunities and challenges in our region, so that generic laws and regulations do not limit the broad prosperity and economy of our area.
2. Apply tailored solutions and align policies with the specific characteristics and needs of our shrinking border region, where the location near the border and the labour market shortages already provide sufficient grounds for allowing education in other languages.
3. Ensure experimental space to expand trinational collaboration and curricula between cross-border knowledge and educational institutions (MBO-HBO-WO).

We would like to work with you to continue building the prosperity of the whole country, and to this end, we would like to enter into a dialogue with you to agree, from the perspective of the border region, on the appropriate approach for the further growth of Limburg's economy, with Limburg's educational institutions as key partners. These institutions are crucial for strengthening the socio-economic and societal innovation capacity in our region, and through cooperation with us, they can continue to contribute to developing the

Brightlands Campuses, making the chemical industry more sustainable, and creating the right conditions for the arrival of the Einstein Telescope.

Yours sincerely,

The Deputy of the Province of Limburg, Elianne Demollin-Schneiders  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Venlo, Antoin Scholten  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Sittard-Geleen, Hans Verheijen  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Weert, Raymond Vlecken  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Heerlen, Roel Wever  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Maastricht, Wim Hillenaar  
The Mayor of the Municipality of Roermond, Yolanda Hoogtanders  
Interim Managing Director of LIOF, Jeroen Walraven  
President of MKB-Limburg, Martijn van Helvert  
President of Limburgse Werkgevers Vereniging, Ron Coenen  
CEO Brightlands Chemelot Campus, Astrid Boeijen  
CEO Brightlands Greenport Campus, Ingrid Vermeer  
CEO Brightlands Maastricht Health Campus, Jan Cobbenhagen  
CEO Brightlands Smart Service Campus, Walter Pijls  
President of the Board of Directors Zuyderland, David Jongen  
President of the Board of Directors SJC Weert, Gertjan Kamps  
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