

# Position and Image of the Human Sciences Course of Study within the Flemish Secondary Education System: Effects of an Educational Reform

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**Abstract** ‘Human Sciences’ is one of the many courses of study in the system of secondary education in Flanders that prepares students for higher education. Despite its aspirations, this course of study is perceived both within and outside the schools as the easiest track and, therefore the lowest rung within general secondary education. In 2001, the Flemish government passed a reform with the intention of upgrading the course of study. In addition to changing the name from ‘Humanities’ to ‘Human Sciences’, structural changes were implemented in order to improve the image. In this article, we assess whether this reform has been successful. Although there is clear evidence of positive developments, several steps must still be taken with regard to positive orientation, transfer opportunities, departmental functioning and school policy.

**Key words** secondary education, human sciences, educational reform, waterfall system

## 1. The Flemish secondary education system

The education system in Belgium is a complex matter. Since 1989, education has fallen almost entirely under the authority of the Flemish

Community, the northern, Dutch-speaking half of Belgium. Full-time secondary education is intended for students from 12 to 18 years of age, and it includes six school years, divided over three stages. In the first stage, the greatest portion of the classroom time is devoted to basic education. Beginning in the second stage (at the age of 14 years), we can distinguish four different forms of education:

1. General secondary education (ASO) emphasises broad general education. Students are not prepared for any specific profession. This form concentrates on providing a sound foundation for higher education, and most students choose to continue their studies after completing ASO.
2. Technical secondary education (TSO) places special emphasis on general and technical/theoretical subjects. After completing TSO, students are prepared to exercise a profession or to proceed to higher education. This form of education also includes practical classes.
3. Secondary arts education (KSO) combines broad, general education with active practice in the arts. After completing KSO, students are prepared to exercise a profession or to proceed to higher education.
4. Vocational secondary education (BSO) is a practice-oriented form of education, in which students learn a specific occupation, in addition to receiving a general education.

Each form of education comprises many courses of study. One of the greatest problems in Flemish education is the ‘waterfall system’. The ‘waterfall system’ is a popular metaphor for the system in which students initially opt for a course of study at a high theoretical level, but then, through failure, gradually descend to a more practical course of study (Luyten & Bosker, 2012). Statistics confirm that, in 2012, the waterfall system in Flanders had not yet been drained. Moreover, the curriculum choices that students in Flanders make during their school careers are often definitive. There are few possibilities for swimming upstream.

## 2. The original course of study in the 'Humanities'

The course of study in the 'Humanities' is relatively new within the ASO. Its story began in the 'normal schools' of the past. In the first half of the 20th century, 'normal schools' were considered a valid alternative to the classic courses of study like Latin-mathematics. The 'normal schools' devoted considerable attention to educational training. The choice to attend a 'normal school' could be made after the fourth stage of the lower school. The program was spread over four years, after which students graduated as qualified teachers. The 'normal schools' were characterized by a strict climate that placed heavy emphasis on order and discipline. This conservative attitude would later come into heavy conflict with the dynamic climate of the 1960s (Van Essen, 2006).

In the late 1960s, new insights emerged with regard to people and society. The concept of intelligence gradually acquired a broader interpretation. Social intelligence came to be recognized, in addition to mathematical, linguistic and spatial-technical intelligence. Relational competence was considered important for all domains of life. Preparing students for later life called for skills other than those stimulated by the courses of study that were available at that time: psychological insight, socially conscious thinking, media skills, organizational skills and communication skills. Society expressed a need for a curriculum that would focus on people and society as the objects of study. There was a need for a category of highly educated people with broad knowledge concerning people in historical, geographic and social contexts.

The predominantly Catholic education system understood the need for such a curriculum. In the background, the Catholic associates cherished the hope that the experiment could be used to avert a new crisis in the faith. In

1968, this led to the establishment of a new course of study in 17 ‘normal schools’: Humanities (Michiels, 2001). Those graduating with diplomas in the humanities were expected to be able to position their own personality characteristics within constructive relationships with others. The Humanities, however, aspired to be innovative in all respects. New teaching methods were expected to sharpen the new substantive learning materials and skills for students. In order to promote personal development, students received considerable autonomy and responsibility. In this way, the course of study was designed with the hope of appealing to students with intelligence equal to that of students in the scientific or mathematical courses of study.

Particularly in Catholic environments, considerable energy was invested in designing and guiding the Humanities curriculum (Beirnaert, 1974). It nevertheless proved difficult to secure a position for the Humanities equivalent to that of the other ASO curricula. This course of study was often perceived as the ‘garbage-can course’ or the ‘lowest rung’ of the ASO. Students who had not succeeded in the traditional ASO curricula often found their way into the Humanities. In this way, they could avoid repeating a year or being ‘demoted’ to TSO or BSO. The course of study was not an immediate success, and it underwent a number of sometimes inconsistent developments within the framework of the educational reforms that took place in the early 1970s and late 1980s (Henkens, 2007). In the mid 1990s, it even seemed that the course of study would be discontinued.

This did not occur, however, although it was generally agreed that the course of study should be upgraded. The revision of the Humanities curriculum began in September 2001. The discipline-specific approach was replaced by an integrated, cross-disciplinary curriculum. The separate subjects (e.g. media, ethics, psychology) were converted to two interdisciplinary subjects – behavioral sciences and cultural sciences – with the goal of drawing connections between subjects (Van Looy & Coninx, 2008). At the same time, a new name was expected to enhance the image. The Human Sciences course

of study was born. In most schools, the transition would not be implemented until 2005-2006.

### 3. The new Human Sciences

About a third of the students in secondary education in Flanders choose to enter ASO. Within one of these forms of education, the student chooses a particular course of study. The Human Sciences course of study is positioned in the second and third stages of the ASO (see Table 1). The course of study is certainly not small in terms of the number of students, accounting for slightly more than 6% of all ASO students. Three fourths of these students are girls. Students choosing Human Sciences exhibit considerable interest in personal and social services (Deprez et al., 2012).

**Table 1: School population, by ASO course of study (Vlaamseoverheid, 2013a)**

Course of study	Total 2nd stage			Total 3rd stage			General total		
	♂	♀	T	♂	♀	T	♂	♀	T
Special academic education	-	-	-	42	34	76	42	34	76
Economics	7,995	8,515	16,510	-	-	-	7,995	8,515	16,510
Economics–Modern languages	-	-	-	4,596	5,507	10,103	4,596	5,507	10,103
Economics–Science	-	-	-	468	352	820	468	352	820
Economics–Mathematics	-	-	-	1,366	1,159	2,525	1,366	1,159	2,525
Greek	177	163	340	-	-	-	177	163	340
Greek–Latin	748	1,007	1,755	229	358	587	977	1,365	2,342
Greek–Modern languages	-	-	-	7	15	22	7	15	22
Greek–Science	-	-	-	45	46	91	45	46	91
Greek–Mathematics	-	-	-	228	268	496	228	268	496
<b>Human Sciences</b>	<b>1,968</b>	<b>6,674</b>	<b>8,642</b>	<b>2,392</b>	<b>7,023</b>	<b>9,415</b>	<b>4,360</b>	<b>13,697</b>	<b>18,057</b>
Latin	6,239	8,282	14,521	-	-	-	6,239	8,282	14,521
Latin–Modern languages	-	-	-	923	2,213	3,136	923	2,213	3,136
Latin–Science	-	-	-	860	1,511	2,371	860	1,511	2,371
Latin–Mathematics	-	-	-	1,824	2,185	4,009	1,824	2,185	4,009
Modern languages–High-level athletics	-	-	-	27	8	35	27	8	35
Modern languages–Science	-	-	-	1,616	2,187	3,803	1,616	2,187	3,803
Modern languages–Mathematics	-	-	-	163	378	541	163	378	541
Rudolf Steiner pedagogics	137	206	343	118	193	311	255	399	654
Sport science	918	472	1,390	735	349	1,084	1,653	821	2,474
Science	10,291	8,503	18,794	-	-	-	10,291	8,503	18,794

Science–High-level athletics	109	59	168	53	25	78	162	84	246
Science–Mathematics	-	-	-	7,340	5,081	12,421	7,340	5,081	12,421
Mathematics–High-level athletics	-	-	-	7	6	13	7	6	13
Yeshiva	29	65	94	32	55	87	61	120	181
<b>Total</b>	<b>28,611</b>	<b>33,946</b>	<b>62,557</b>	<b>23,071</b>	<b>28,953</b>	<b>52,024</b>	<b>51,682</b>	<b>62,899</b>	<b>114,581</b>

The course of study includes the basic general subjects (e.g. mathematics, Dutch, French, English), as well as a specific section (behavioral and cultural sciences). It is interesting to note the lack of a dividing line between these two specific subjects. The same seven profile components are found in each of the two subjects: (1) interaction and communication, (2) identity, (3) continuity and change, (4) consistency and interaction, (5) expression, (6) values and (7) scientific research methods. The *Vlaamse Onderwijsraad* [Flemish Education Council] (1999) defines the two specific subjects as follows:

- The behavioral sciences are sciences that investigate the functioning of individuals and society, as well as the ways in which people act in and perceive society. Based on this general approach, the behavioral sciences focus on the creation of interpretative frameworks and explanatory models that can be used to identify problems concerning the individual and society. Based on these premises, the behavioral sciences pursue the development of solutions.
- The cultural sciences are aimed at the critical study of cultural expressions as the expression of people and society. The cultural sciences lead to reflection on and structure in cultural phenomena.

The Human Sciences course of study is intended for students who are particularly interested in human relationships and everything that takes place within society (*Vlaamseoverheid*, 2013b). Human Sciences students are immersed in both of specific domains of study, which require considerable capacity for abstract thought and a sense of analysis and synthesis. The subject area of the behavioral sciences comprises psychology, sociology, anthropology and education. The behavior of people as individuals and their behavior within society constitute areas of particular focus. The topics addressed in the behavioral sciences also include relationships of all types, as

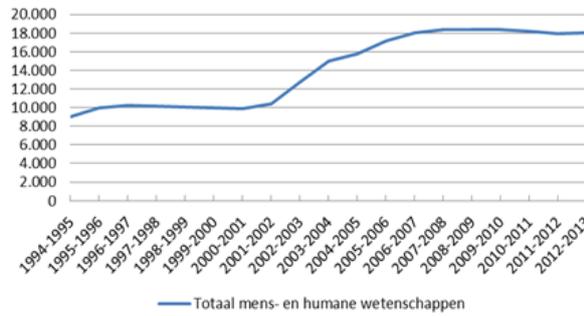
well as human growth and development. The subject of cultural sciences includes ethics, aesthetics, philosophy, history, law and economics. Art is a commonly discussed topic, as are cultural phenomena and the transfer of culture within society.

#### 4. Quantitative overview of the transition

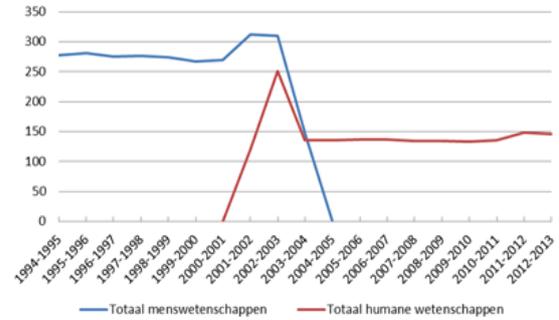
After the transition, the Human Sciences course of study enjoyed renewed interest and popularity, as evidenced by the positive developments in the total number of registered Human Sciences students, as compared to those registered in the Humanities (Figure 1, Graph 1). Beginning in 2005, the number of Human Sciences students nearly doubled the number of Humanities students in 2001. It is interesting to note that, before the reform, there were many more students in the third-stage Humanities than there were in the second stage (Figure 1, Graph 3), while the two stages of Human Sciences have remained nearly equal since 2005. This development seems to indicate that the reform has had a positive effect and that the course of study has become less of a safety net for ASO students from the other courses of study. The figures suggest that the waterfall system within the ASO has declined with regard to the Human Sciences course of study.

The number of schools offering Human Sciences is more limited than is the number of schools that had offered Humanities (Figure 1, Graph 2). Nevertheless, the number of schools with Human Sciences is distributed more evenly across the Flemish municipalities than were the schools that had offered the Humanities (Figure 2).

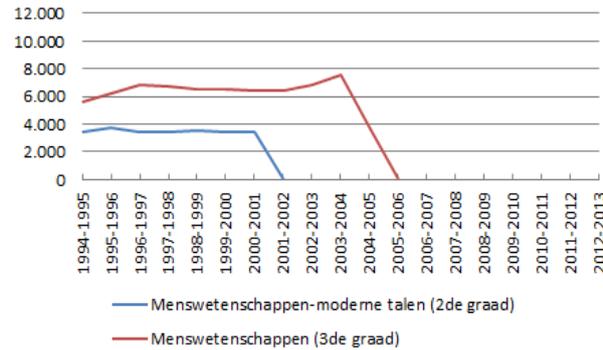
**Figure 1: Developments in the transition from Humanities to Human Sciences**  
(*Vlaamseoverheid, 2013d*)



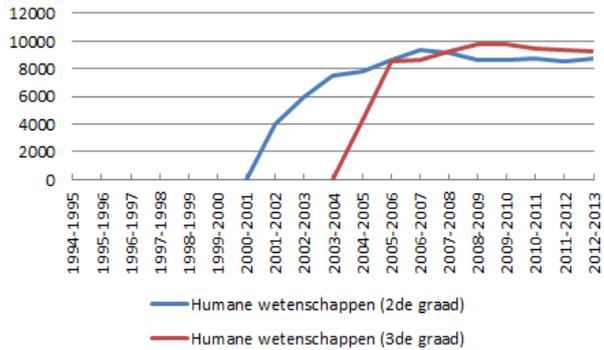
Grafiek 1: de ontwikkeling van het totaal aantal leerlingen in de richting & humane wetenschappen in Vlaanderen, 1994 - 2013.



Grafiek 2: de ontwikkeling van het totaal aantal scholen met mens- & humane wetenschappen in Vlaanderen, 1994 - 2013.

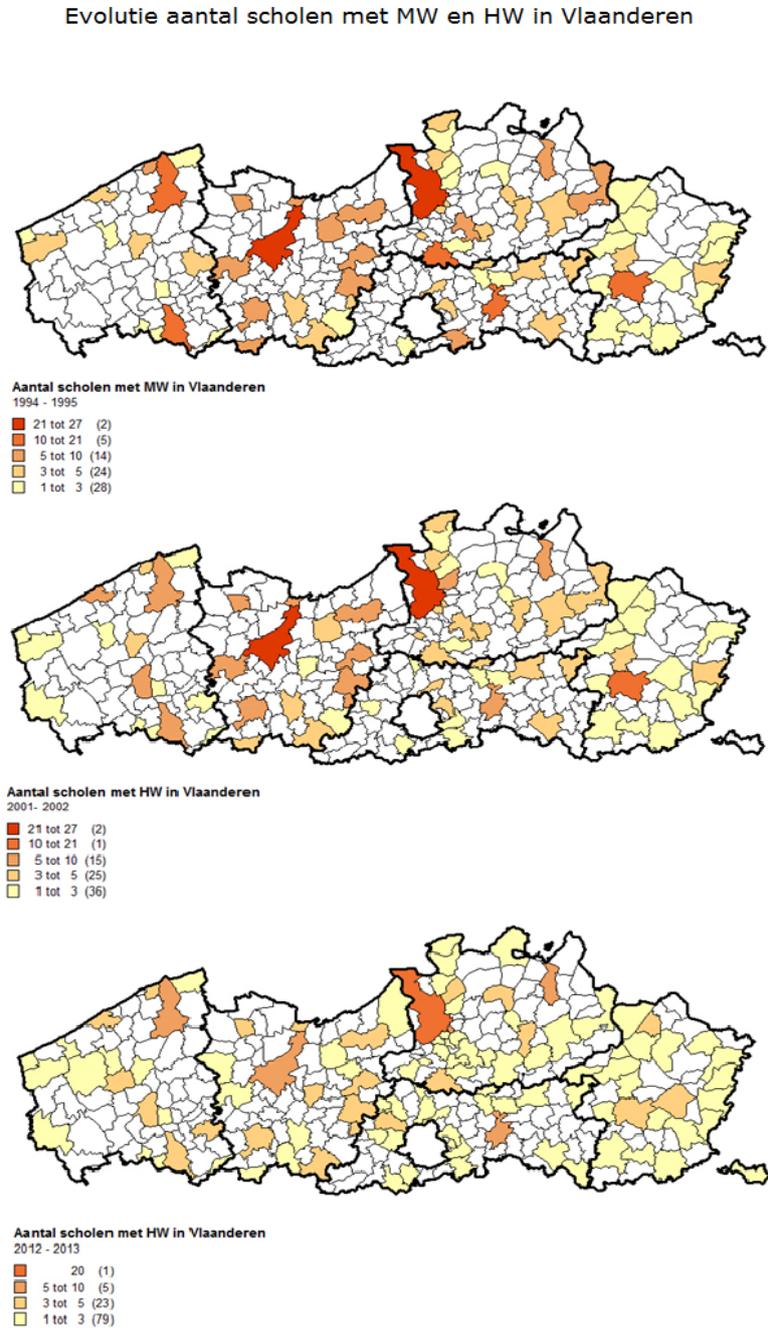


Grafiek 3: de ontwikkeling van het totaal aantal leerlingen in de 2<sup>de</sup> en 3<sup>de</sup> graad menswetenschappen, 1994 - 2013.



Grafiek 4: de ontwikkeling van het totaal aantal leerlingen in de 2<sup>de</sup> en 3<sup>de</sup> graad humane wetenschappen, 1994 - 2013.

**Figure 2: Developments in the number of schools with Humanities and Human Sciences in Flanders (Vlaamseoverheid, 2013d)**



## 5. Transition to higher education

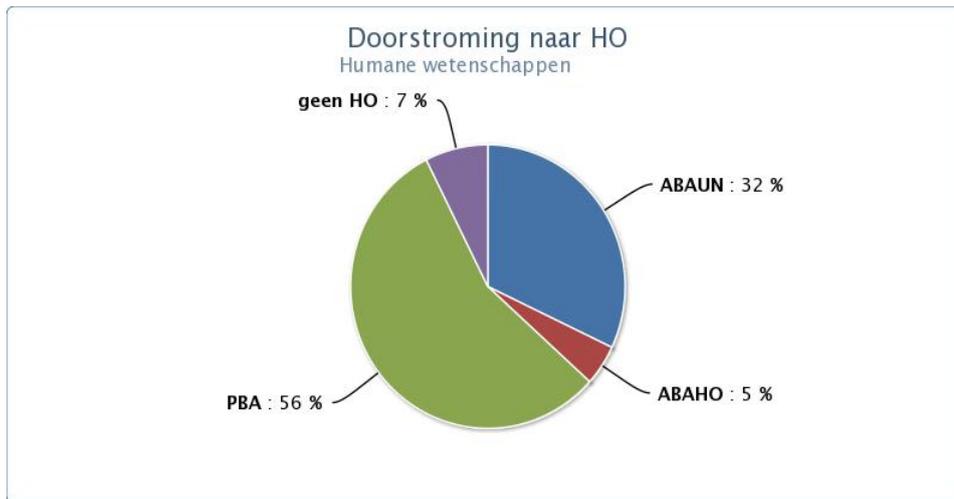
In order to be a full-fledged course of study within the ASO, it is necessary to secure the number of students transferring into higher education. The pass rate for most Human Sciences students (N=13,016) is relatively high (see Table 2): 57% transfer to PBA, while 33% transfer to ABAUN. Nevertheless, the average number of credits earned within ABAUN (43.1) is low. The average number of credits earned within PBA (65.5) is moderate to high. Only 7.5% of the students do not go on to receive any higher education. The broad substantive spectrum of the higher education degree programs that are selected reflects the diversity of interests within the student population for this course of study. The low success rate for academic studies and the relatively high success rate for professional higher studies, however, are indicative of a profile of students who are more likely to have attained an average level of abstraction. This course of study leaves open many wide exits. Nevertheless, it is also not given that students in mathematics or science will continue their studies. Students completing the Human Sciences course of study are most likely to enter programs within the domain of ‘Welfare and Society’. For this reason, Human Sciences is sometimes described as a preparation for the soft sector.

**Table 2: Transfers from Human Sciences to higher education (VVKSO, 2013)**

Higher education degree programme	GH	OP	PG	SS	SS = 100%	SS = 50-99%	SS = 1-49%	SS = 0%
<b>ABAUN</b>	4242	32.6%						
Communication science	390	3%	41.7	7.4%	34.4%	38.2%	19.5%	
Criminal studies	362	2.8%	44.5	12.4%	32.3%	34%	20.7%	
History	315	2.4%	41.5	8.3%	31.1%	45.1%	14.9%	
Educational science	285	2.2%	64	15.8%	55.1%	24.2%	3.9%	
Psychology	926	7.1%	46.8	11.6%	34.2%	40.4%	12.5%	
Law	517	4%	35.3	7.5%	24.4%	47.4%	19.7%	
<b>ABAHO</b>	616	4,7%						
<b>PBA</b>	7397	56,8%						
Business management	346	2,7%	59	15,9%	46,8%	27,7%	8,4%	

Communications management	289	2,2%	58.1	12,5%	51,2%	28,7%	6,9%
Education, earlyprimary school	368	2,8%	73.9	38,3%	47,6%	10,9%	3,3%
Education, primary school	958	7,4%	67.9	21,9%	55,3%	18,3%	3,9%
Education, secondary school	740	5,7%	63.2	23,8%	45,1%	23,2%	7,4%
Remedial education	739	5,7%	71.3	25,8%	51,4%	18,9%	3%
Socialwork	1096	8,4%	68	24,3%	51,1%	20,2%	4,1%
Appliedpsychology	515	4%	62.8	18,4%	49,5%	27%	4,9%
Nursing	514	3,9%	71.3	29,8%	50,6%	13,6%	5,4%
No highereducation	981	7,5%					

<b>Legend</b>	
<b>ABAUN</b>	Academic Bachelor degree (university)
<b>ABAHO</b>	Academic Bachelor degree (university of applied science)
<b>PBA</b>	Professional Bachelor degree
<b>SS</b>	Average success rate This is an indication of success (or the lack thereof) in higher education. It is determined by dividing the number of credits earned (courses passed) by the number of active credits included (courses for which a student had registered; for most first-year students, 60 credits) and multiplying the result by 100. Assessed credits (absolute number of points earned on failed examinations) are not included in this indicator. In the table, SS is displayed with a certain colour code that is linked to the numerical information.
<b>SS=100%</b>	The percentage of first-year students achieving 100% of the credits within the academic year (same as for SS = 50-99% ... ).
<b>GHO</b>	First-year students in higher education A first-year student is defined as a student enrolling for the first time in the Flemish higher education system with a diploma contract for an initial Bachelor degree. This analysis is based on data from three academic years: 2007-2008; 2008-2009 and 2009-2010. This allows us to present the success rates in a more reliable manner.
<b>PG</b>	Matriculation rate The matriculation rate is the percentage of secondary graduates registering in higher education in the year referred to in the report.



## 6. Human Sciences inspected

The Human Sciences course of studies has existed for more than a decade now. As noted, considerable effort has been expended to improve the image of this track and to make it into a full-fledged ASO track. The question now is whether the transition has achieved the desired result. The auditing reports prepared by the Education Inspectorate provide additional insight into this matter (Vlaamseoverheid, 2013c). An analysis of all Flemish schools offering the Human Sciences course of study reveals the following:

- In general, the course of study succeeds in achieving its curriculum objectives.
- With regard to school results, most Human Sciences students score well on the two specific subjects 'Behavioural sciences' and 'Cultural sciences'. On the basic subjects, the students' scores are lower than average.
- The department comprising teachers of Human Sciences plays a crucial role within the school, given that the specific subjects of Behavioural sciences and Cultural sciences encompass several disciplines. Thorough consultation between teachers is therefore essential. The results of the report indicate that many Human Sciences departments function

exceptionally well. This is largely due to the strong social skills, good communication skills and considerable engagement of Human Sciences teachers. It is interesting to note that good departments within schools are usually combined with student counselling and a positive policy of orientation to Human Sciences.

- In a number of schools, students continue to transfer into Human Sciences after failing to advance in another course of study. Nevertheless, many students have made a well-considered and positive choice for Human Sciences. The Human Sciences course of study is gradually shedding its negative image, and it is no longer perceived as a 'garbage-can' course. This is also evidenced by the fact that pupils who transfer to Human Sciences later in the year are nevertheless required to make a serious effort. Although students receive very good counselling in nearly all schools, the transition is not easy.
- The course of study cannot realize its potential unless specific classrooms are available, equipped with instructional materials (e.g. a projector and a computer). The course of study must constantly respond to current events. Subscriptions to magazines, newspapers and self-made handbooks are therefore more a necessity than they are a luxury. In addition, it is important for the students to work on their own and to have the opportunity to search references in libraries and media centers. The majority of schools, however, lack adequate infrastructure and materials.

The Education Inspectorate notes that the Human Sciences course of study has everything it needs in order to free itself from its negative image and develop into a full-fledged ASO course. Some schools have yet to be successful in this regard. Conditions for success include a positive orientation policy, an active department within the school, elaborate student counselling and a sound infrastructure.

## 7. Focus on the educational approach

To gain a better understanding of the micro-processes underlying the results reported by the Inspectorate, interviews were held with seven educational counsellors from the Human Sciences course of study. The core duties of educational counsellors consist of helping schools in the realization of their educational projects and supervising teachers. In addition, educational counsellors play an important role in organizing the departments and the realization of curricula. Educational counsellors have good insight into the educational process in Human Sciences, because they maintain many contacts with teachers and school boards. In the section below, we present the results by topic.

### 7.1. Orientation to Human Sciences

According to the educational counsellors, the orientation to Human Sciences is still problematic in many cases, due to erroneous perceptions of the Human Sciences profile on the part of many parents, students and teachers (outside Human Sciences). It begins in the class council, which provides orientation to students and advises them in the choice of a course of study. In many cases, the results for language and mathematics are decisive, and students who have scored poorly are advised to enroll in Human Sciences. As a matter of course, students with good scores in language or mathematics are advised to choose a course of study in mathematics or languages. This practice overlooks the possibility that these ‘stronger’ pupils might possess the proper interests and capabilities to enroll in Human Sciences.

In addition, the recommendations are not usually binding. In practice, therefore, parents and students have the last word in the choice of a course of study. Many parents also still consider the Human Sciences course of study as a weak link within ASO. They try to keep their children in a mathematics or language course of study for as long as possible. When a son or daughter

receives poor marks, Human Sciences is often considered as a way of avoiding TSO. At the beginning of the second stage, students are required to choose a course of study, and they often follow the advice of their parents. Students in the third stage are more likely to make a conscious choice for the Human Sciences course of study, because they have a better view of the own capacities and interests.

In order to break the negative orientation pattern of teachers and parents with regard to Human Sciences, some schools have chosen to fill in the elective portion of the curriculum with mathematics. This adaptation makes the course of study attractive to students who are strong in mathematics, and it is no longer an option for pupils with poor scores in this area. The appropriateness of additional mathematics in the study profile for Human Sciences is debatable, however, and it could arguably make more sense to reinforce the course of study by adding depth to the subjects of behavioral sciences and cultural sciences. Educational counsellors are encouraging schools to establish an entrance threshold for students who transfer to Human Sciences later. In concrete terms, such a threshold could consist of a remedial packet or an intake interview. Such initiatives nevertheless tend to have an optional character.

## 7.2. Transition to higher education

In theory, as an ASO course of study, Human Sciences should prepare students for all forms of higher education. In reality, the step to an academic programme is too large for many, even within their own areas of study (e.g. communication sciences, psychology, sociology, adult education). Many Human Sciences students do not transfer to the university because their level of abstraction is lower than that of students from the other ASO courses of study. In many cases, they do not possess the prerequisite ‘Human Sciences’

profile and, conversely, many students who do have the ‘Human Sciences’ profile do not enter this curriculum, preferring to follow ‘stronger’ curricula.

In this regard, however, we can note that the transition to an academic program need not be an end in itself. If the actual profiles of Human Sciences students are more appropriate to a professional program, and if this is the first choice of these students, they are likely to have found the right place. This confronts us with another facet of the waterfall system: society assigns greater value to academic programs than it does to higher professional programs. Such assumptions obstruct the general view of what is most important – that individual students arrive in the places that are most appropriate to their own profiles.

### 7.3. Departmental functioning

Within the department, teachers can exchange information and make sure that everyone is on the same page. This is particularly important for Human Sciences, given that two interdisciplinary subjects (i.e. behavioral sciences and culture sciences) are offered within this course of study. In practice, departmental functioning can differ from one school to the next. This depends upon the attitude of the teachers, although the school board also bears a major responsibility to provide the necessary time for departmental functioning. In their turn, educational counsellors can contribute to the functioning of the departments by helping them to become more professional. In some cases, they organize departments across schools.

Since the reform, teachers have been on their own with regard to the development of teaching materials for the interdisciplinary studies in behavioral sciences and cultural sciences. Through the years, handbooks have emerged on the market, although handbooks are not always the most appropriate resources for the activating approach adopted within Human Sciences. Moreover, the subjects are also so vulnerable to paradigm transitions

and current events that handbooks are often outdated before they are published. Fortunately, the time-consuming task of developing materials can be included within the departments, thereby achieving an efficient task division. Departments across schools can also fulfil an important role in this regard.

#### 7.4. School infrastructure and personnel policy

The differences in facilities between schools are very large. Some schools have designated separate areas within their school buildings for Human Sciences. In contrast, other schools do not even have Internet connections in the classroom. There are various causes for this situation. Some schools do not have access to the necessary materials, although it is often due to organizational or substantive choices. School boards should treat Human Sciences as having sufficient value to justify investment. At the same time, departments are responsible for making their needs clear to their school boards.

The interdisciplinary nature of the subjects in Human Sciences plays to the disadvantage of this course of study with regard personnel policy. It can generate the impression that everyone is capable of teaching these subjects. It is thus also common practice to use the hours allocated for Human Sciences to supplement the hours of teachers in other subject areas. This degrades the status of the course of study amongst teachers.

## 8. Conclusion

The position and the image of the Human Sciences course of study within the Flemish secondary education system are subject to several trends that transcend the actual course of study. It is dependent upon the general social valuation of professions and the current structure of the Flemish education

situation. As long as these remain unchanged, Human Sciences will continue to struggle with a structural disadvantage. The waterfall system cannot be discontinued until society is able to develop a broader perception of intelligence, such that the 'soft' sector is considered of equal value.

That does not mean, however, that there are no possibilities for improvement. The transition from the Humanities to Human Sciences has improved the image of the course of study. Considerable effort has been invested in profiling in order to ensure that the 'right' students enter the course of study. The clearest signals come from Human Sciences teachers, sometimes supported by their school boards. In contrast, the old image has yet to be abandoned by some of the other teachers and parents.

Although the Inspectorate indicates that the course of study is achieving its goals, students graduating from this course of study appear to transfer unilaterally to higher professional education programs, thereby being under-represented in academic higher education. The extent to which this is experienced as a problem is open to debate. For the current generations of Human Sciences students, this has proven to be the 'correct' place. If the goal is also to prepare students for academic programs within the same field, the bar should be raised with regard to admission into the course of study, as well as with regard to the objectives.

In order to strengthen its position and image, the Human Sciences course of study must deliver quality and continue to deliver quality. The departments play a key role in this regard. In addition, school boards should allow space for departmental functioning, organize counselling for students, provide the necessary infrastructure and operate a personnel policy with respect to the profile for Human Sciences. Only if all of these conditions are met, will the course of study be able to meet the high quality requirements. In practice, it appears that the ability to achieve this level is strongly dependent upon the school.

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