

Bringing together space professionals and schools with the 'RuimteWijs' project

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Educating children about what space and related science and technologies can offer to everyday life, is the key to a higher level of space related activity. Inspiring new generations to explore our planet Earth and beyond will, in the long run, lead to an increase of peace, prosperity, security and freedom for all inhabitants of planet Earth.

Additional arguments to offer space education to children is that they will be the future taxpayers and need to be convinced at an early age that investment in space science and technology leads to sustainable development, both economically and culturally. Also, the children of today embody the workforce of tomorrow. With the decline in student numbers for technical studies, there is a clear need to inspire them to acquire a technical education where after they may have solid and satisfying jobs in a growing space sector.

'RuimteWijs' (SpaceWisdom) is a project of the Netherlands Society for Aerospace (NVR). The NVR was founded back in 1951 and is one of the oldest space societies in the world. One of NVR's prime objectives is to inform Dutch speaking people about the need and wonders of space and related research and technology developments. Through the special website of the NVR schools can contact space professionals. Both interested schools and space professionals sign up at this website and contact each other to arrange visits and lectures. The 'RuimteWijs' programme is supported by a number of Dutch space industries and institutes such as the Netherlands Institute for Space Research SRON, Space Horizon, Bureau BD, Space Generation, Millhouse, space.cweb.nl and FunScience.

The 'RuimteWijs' project started in October 2005 with the launch of ESA's Venus Express spacecraft. Under leadership of NOVA (Dutch Research School for Astronomy) and together with ESA, TNO, University of Amsterdam and Leopold, a contest was issued to middle schools to write a science fiction story about Venus. This contest was partly inspired by the Dutch children's book "Torenhoog en mijlen breed" by Tonke Dragt (1969), which is considered in the Netherlands as one of the best children's books ever. This book deals with inhabitants on Venus that

are constrained in domes. These people are extremely scared of the violent nature of Venus ("Where are forests, hot as fire"...). To promote the science fiction writing contest, 9000 postcards were mailed to schools to stimulate participation. Figure 1 shows this postcard.



Figure 1: 9000 of these postcards were mailed to Dutch middle schools to call for participation in the science fiction writing contest.

In August 2006, the price for the best science fiction story about Venus was awarded to Sophie Wiegiersma.

At the moment of writing, some 16 schools and 24 space professionals have signed up for the 'RuimteWijs' programme. Many contacts were established and visits and lectures were provided. Also, presentation material for different types of school has been provided by volunteers and made available through the website.

The NVR wishes to increase the number of participating schools and professionals by actively promoting this project. The NVR plans to request Dutch space industry and institutes to free a number of hours for a number of space professionals to enable them to make visits to schools each year.

The NVR also wishes that space promotion will be more widely accepted in other countries. Nowadays, through the internet, it is very easy to create contacts between space professionals and schools, but only as long as the initiative is actively and continuously promoted.