

Development of the common skills language: CompetentNL

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 NETHERLANDS

Timeline

2022 Approved/Agreed

2023 Design

2024 Design

2025 Implementation

ID number 43556

Background

In the past, the knowledge, skills and competences required in the labour market were not readily visible to employers, job seekers and trainers. Finding employees with the desired skills has been challenging. Also, for the job seekers it has been hard so far to decide which training (skills and competences) are essential for jobs that are currently in high demand. This information is crucial for educators and trainers in order to provide the right training, aligning with the needs of the labour market. The number of unfilled vacancies in Netherlands is has been in 2022 historically high (371 000). To overcome such burdens and address the lack of specialised personnel, the government is investing in the development of a skills-oriented labour market. This requires describing knowledge, skills and competences for performing work in terms of skills. To this end, a common skills language called, CompetentNL, is being developed.

Objectives

CompetentNL aims to develop a national, connecting skill language that makes transparent which knowledge, skills and competences are relevant to the labour market and which training courses people can take to develop any missing skills. The more parties use the same skills language, the more valuable the insight into skills are for an individual:

- (a) companies can recognise the skills of an applicant or worker;
- (b) education institutions can make targeted decisions on granting exemptions;
- (c) individuals can make targeted choices for (modular) retraining and further training;
- (d) the VET qualification structure can be used more flexibly.

Description

The government is investing in the development of a skills-oriented labour market. This entails describing the required knowledge, skills and behaviours for the performance of activities in terms of skills: a common skills language, called CompetentNL, is being developed for this purpose. CompetentNL is an online skills dictionary in which all possible skills are categorised and described and which is linked to the complete and continuously updated VET qualification structure. CompetentNL provides the platform for vocational choice and career development based on skills. All providers of skill applications can make unlimited and free use of CompetentNL, for their own application. The more parties use the

same skills language, the more valuable the insight into skills is for individuals: companies will be able to recognise the skills of applicants or workers; education institutions can make informed decisions about granting exemptions; and individuals can make targeted choices for (modular) retraining and further training.

2022 Approved/Agreed

Funding has been made available: in 2022, EUR 25 million from the National growth fund for the skills programme was awarded to develop the Skills language CompetentNL in the coming years. All major stakeholders, including the education ministry, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB), the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency (UWV), Statistics Netherlands (CBS), and the Dutch Organisation for Applied Natural Science Research (TNO) work together on describing all professional skills and personal qualities in the same language and linking them to projects already running, including Skills for professions and to Skills in the VET qualification structure.

CompetentNL will be made available to all parties active in the labour market and education. It will allow employers, job seekers and trainers to see where opportunities lie and how people can be quickly deployed for vacancies.

In April 2021, the grant had already been conditionally awarded. In 2022 the partners fleshed out the programme plan. For instance, the intention is to make the skill language also available for education sectors other than VET. Precise moments of evaluation within the process have also been built for each phase, and progress and results will be reported annually.

2023 Design

The education minister tasked SBB with exploring the opportunities provided by a common skills language in addressing various challenges related to the qualification structure, including relevance, flexibility for the labour market (regional and otherwise), initial students, reorientation, lifelong learning, and differences between levels and sectors.

In its 2023 report, Insights for a Future-Proof Qualification Structure, SBB outlined its recommendations through key themes aiming at achieving this goal. These included ensuring the relevance of current and future qualifications, enhancing flexibility and orientation in vocational education (MBO), further supporting Lifelong Learning (LLO), and advancing the development of the common skills language.

Regarding CompetentNL specifically, the document highlights the following points: A common skills language offers significant opportunities to improve and update the qualification structure in VET, addressing the evolving needs of the labour market. It enhances orientation, facilitates smoother transitions between study paths, and supports diverse target groups, including those engaged in lifelong learning. While the skills language is still under development, it shows great promise by enabling the qualification structure to standardise descriptions, identify equivalent elements across qualifications, and promote skills portability across sectors and learning pathways.

Between October 2022 and April 2023, the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) conducted an extensive market exploration involving approximately 240 parties. In 2023, CompetentNL was further developed and refined through several pilot projects conducted in collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders. Findings from these pilots were shared with a feedback group comprising nearly 50 relevant parties, who provided valuable suggestions for enhancing and improving CompetentNL. This process helped identify users' information needs and clarified the requirements for the content and accessibility of the system.

2024 Design

At the end of June 2024, the Ministries of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW),

Education, Culture and Science (OCW), and Economic Affairs and Climate (EZK) approved the further development of the first publicly accessible version of CompetentNL.

On September 24, CompetentNL was officially launched as the national standard for describing skills in the Netherlands. The Secretary of State for Employment and Social Affairs symbolically received the first API key, marking the start of a new, unified language for skills, independent of diplomas or CVs. An API (Application Programming Interface) is a technical way for different computer systems, software applications, or databases (relevant, for example, to skills-matching tools, digital portfolios and job platforms) to communicate with each other automatically. CompetentNL provides the foundation for a more agile, inclusive, and future-proof labour market. By focusing on what people can actually do, rather than just their formal qualifications, it enables fairer opportunities, flexible learning pathways, and stronger collaboration between education, employers, and labour market stakeholders.

The CompetentNL Viewer went live, offering public access to the initial version of the skills language. It includes skills, occupations, and educational standards, starting with all Dutch vocational (MBO) qualifications, and shows how they interrelate. CompetentNL is intended for use by employers, municipalities, educators, students, and job seekers, and can power tools such as skills matching platforms, digital learning portfolios, curriculum design, and labour market analytics.

2025 Implementation

The basic version of CompetentNL is operational, and its further development is planned for 2026.

Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
- Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market (SBB)
- Employee Insurance Agency (UWV)
- Statistics Netherlands (CBS)
- Dutch organisation for applied natural science research (TNO)

Target group

Learners

Adult learners

Education professionals

Teachers

Trainers

Entities providing VET

Companies

VET providers (all kinds)

Thematic categories

Transparency and portability of VET skills and qualifications

Comprehensive national qualification frameworks

Subsystem

Further reading

[Policy letter of Education Ministry on investments in VET and lifelong learning, July 2022](#)

[Flyer providing information on CompetentNL](#)

[Advice from SBB to Minister of education on a future-proof qualification structure](#)

[Website CompetentNL](#)

[News article from website CompetentNL](#)

Related policy developments

2025 Implementation

Measures to promote lifelong learning

Several measures have been developed by the education and labour ministries to stimulate enrolment in lifelong learning. The measures concern both the supply side and the demand side of the adult training market.

 NETHERLANDS

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

CVET

“ ... ” Cite as

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