

# National support programme to mitigate COVID-19 consequences in education

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGY/ACTION PLAN

 NETHERLANDS

## Timeline

2021 Implementation

2022 Implementation

2023 Implementation

2024 Completed

ID number 41985

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic had major consequences on education, especially on students. In 2020, many students in various education sectors experienced a delay in their individual learning path compared to other school years, because face-to-face education at several moments was replaced by online education. The magnitude of delays varies between students, grades and schools. VET students have been hit extra hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, because possibilities for internships diminished. Education inequality has increased.

The COVID-19 crisis did not only cause delays in cognitive development, but also in social-emotional and executive development. There are signs that more young people suffer from social-emotional problems. Loneliness, gloominess, depression and resulting behaviours amplify the negative consequences for the development of young people. This applies to all the young, but particularly to those in a vulnerable position.

## Objectives

The goal of the National education programme is to reduce learning disadvantages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There will be special attention to the quality of education and the well-being of students. The scope of education delays will be made clear and the understanding of which interventions are most effective will increase. Education equality will also be promoted.

## Description

COVID-19 caused a delay in studies for many students. To recover from these delays, the Dutch government has made EUR 8.5 billion available for a national education support programme for recovery and perspective (*Nationaal Programma Onderwijs: steunprogramma voor herstel en perspectief*, NPO), of which EUR 2.7 billion has been reserved for measures in upper secondary vocational education programmes. Over the next 2 school years (2020/21 and 2021/22), VET colleges may choose from a menu of interventions and invest this in the social-emotional and cognitive development of pupils and students, and in catching up with the pandemic delays.

The ministry noted that there was an increasing delay in educational progress in VET due to education that could be given: limited possibilities for practical education, internships that were cancelled, and arrears incurred in secondary education. By means of the support programme for recovery and perspective (NPO), schools could receive extra budget to catch up with programmes in 2021. The subsidy is meant for programmes outside and in addition to the regular education programme for vulnerable students and for students who have experienced a delay in the progress of their vocational training.

The duration of the existing subsidy programme Extra help in the classroom (*Extra Hulp voor de Klas*) was extended to the end of 2021 and has been included in the NPO. Additional funds have been made available through this programme for VET colleges to hire extra staff (covering for absences due to illness, extra work). The aim is to minimise the consequences of COVID-19 and guarantee the continuity of education.

In the NPO, funds have also been made available for extra support and aftercare in VET, to provide extra guidance to final-year VET students and aftercare to VET graduates. This is especially for those students who experience more difficulties entering the labour market, due to dropping out of education, labour market demands in their field of study, or labour market discrimination because of their migrant background.

### **2021 Implementation**

The programme was introduced in February 2021 and, because of its urgency, was immediately implemented.

An administrative agreement between the education ministry, the Association of VET Colleges and several associations of higher education institutions has been made to determine which measures can be taken in upper secondary vocational education and higher professional education until the end of 2022. It was agreed to use the available budget within 2 years to implement those measures to prevent delays in the educational progress of students as a result of the virus and to prevent spreading of the virus, which limited the continuation of classes in school.

The Netherlands Association of VET Colleges has drawn up a collection of service documents for VET institutions that provide tools for the challenges they faced during COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdowns. This concerned short-term support from the Association of VET colleges, which is not part of the NPO.

The first progress report of the NPO shows that the plans of the institutions show a clear prioritisation. Institutions mainly opt for tackling study delay and problems encountered by students in transitions between and within the education sectors (42%) and improving student well-being (almost 30%). As rapid economic recovery helps VET students to obtain internships those that were cancelled in an earlier stage can easily be recovered. However, the economic recovery causes labour market shortages. VET institutions expect difficulties in the implementation of the NPO due to shortages in staff.

### **2022 Implementation**

The second evaluative report monitoring the implementation of the NPO was published in November 2022. The main findings reveal that the latest lockdown has exacerbated pre-problems among students and staff, and has also brought up new needs. Institutions indicate that it is increasingly difficult to indicate whether the problems being identified are related to COVID-19, i.e. arise from the consequences of the lockdowns, or are caused by an accumulation of other factors and social issues. In general, it is indicated that the resilience of students appears to be lower than before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unclear whether the pandemic/lockdowns are the cause of this or whether the limited resilience of students observed by institutions already existed and has only become apparent due to the lockdowns. The reduced resilience also means that experts at institutions expect new circumstances, such as financial problems and housing shortages, to result in more complaints and support needs than would have been the case previously.

It remains a challenge for the institutions to properly identify the needs of students in a vulnerable position and to act accordingly in a timely manner. Therefore, institutions have made considerable efforts in recent months to address both aspects of this challenge - identification and action. The shift towards focusing more on student wellbeing was already visible during the previous evaluation and continues. This mainly involves implementing measures to communicate with students in an accessible manner, such as peer-to-peer coaching, study coaches, drop-in points at locations and organising different types of contact moments. In addition to improving identification, the care structure of VET institutions has been improved with the help of NPO resources, and work is underway to strengthen the knowledge and experience of the education teams in this area.

The extent of any learning gaps among students who enrolled in September has not yet become clear within this short period of time. The expectation is that these students will have to be supervised more intensively in the coming months in order to prevent dropouts and/or delays. In addition, institutions expect more students that switch their educational path than in previous years or students who temporarily stop their studies, for example as a result of a change in study direction or even a reorientation in life choices.

The implementation of the NPO plans has gained momentum. Unfortunately, research resources are not always sufficient to cover all the damage suffered, and some institutions have little knowledge of the existence of these resources and how to claim them. Despite labour market shortages, institutions have largely succeeded in recruiting staff or expanding existing contracts, although this varies by institution/region. Recruitment has been particularly successful for positions within the care structure and other types of positions offering support for students (coaches, learning path counsellors, etc). However, the situation is different for attracting teachers, especially in sectors with shortages. In the past period, partly thanks to NPO resources, institutions have developed a range of measures and interventions for the various types of issues they have faced and are still confronted with. Institutions indicate that the extension of the NPO term contributes to the effective use of resources for students who need it.

In November 2022, the second evaluative report monitoring the macro effects of the NPO was published. The results of the second Macromonitor NPO on secondary vocational education (MBO) and Higher Professional Education (HBO) report show that a lot has changed for students since the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, the observed developments appear to have been a temporary shock that quickly recovered - in particular due to easing of previous corona measures - as evidenced by the temporary drop in first-year dropout rates, the temporary higher intake in the teacher training study programmes, the temporary drop in the number of internships and the temporarily lower job opportunities among school-leavers from secondary vocational education. At the same time, negative social consequences actually seem to have increased as the pandemic progressed, such as less attachment to education and less motivation to study. However, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions, since dropping out can still take place in later academic years and the study success rate for cohorts of students who entered secondary vocational education and higher education after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be determined yet. The fact that low(er) study motivation and commitment to the study program go hand in hand with more dropout and a lower study success rate as a result of study delay, will mean that this has to be taken into account in the near future. In any case, educational institutions have for the time being, proven successful in limiting dropout rates and thus retaining students within the education system.

### **2023 Implementation**

In May 2023, SEO Economic Research (*SEO Economisch Onderzoek*), an independent research institute affiliated with the University of Amsterdam, published a social cost-benefit analysis on the effects of the NPO on VET (and higher education). The report examined the impact of various measures on students, educational institutions, employers, the government, and society. Reported impact for students is reduced study delays and dropouts, achieved through better educational quality, extra

activities, and improved internship guidance. For educational institutions, NPO contributed to higher graduation rates, increased funding, and improved job satisfaction among educational staff. Employers benefited from better-educated students, who are more prepared to enter the workforce. For the government and municipalities higher tax revenues and reduced social security costs were reported. For the society positive impacts included lower crime rates, better public health, and broader knowledge dissemination through peer effects and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

#### Evaluation findings (2023)

Two evaluations of the NPO's implementation were conducted in 2023. While the results were promising, it remains difficult to directly correlate the deployment of NPO resources to the observed effects due to the short evaluation period and limited available data. Based on the findings, it is plausible—but not definitive—that the NPO contributed to these outcomes.

Regarding resource allocation: in both evaluations VET colleges were on track to fully utilise NPO funding within the programme's term. They can spend the money until 2023 with 2024 as possible run-out year. Funds have primarily been used to support smooth transitions into and within VET, focusing on additional guidance and educational supply, with many actions nearing completion.

Regarding secondary education and transition to VET: during the pandemic, looser secondary education exam requirements resulted in students entering VET with fewer skills, increasing the risk of dropout. Additionally, according to the fifth evaluation report, fewer students transitioned from secondary education to VET, possibly due to the looser requirements prompting more students to continue into senior general secondary education (*HAVO*).

Regarding student well-being: Both evaluations indicated improvements in student well-being and reductions in motivational problems. However, these improvements cannot be solely attributed to the NPO, as additional funds for student well-being were already in place before COVID-19. Well-being remains a pressing issue, requiring sustained institutional commitment. On-site teaching has proven critical to student well-being, while digitalisation efforts initiated during the pandemic are being maintained and integrated where effective. Teachers are receiving training in digital skills and blended learning.

Regarding study delays: the fourth evaluation report mentions that fewer students reported study delays, thanks to institutional efforts supported by the NPO. This decrease is also linked to improvements in motivation and well-being, as students who still report delays often face persistent motivational and well-being challenges.

Regarding internships and apprenticeships: the fifth evaluation reports that the reopening of sectors has resolved many internship shortages, although a general shortage persists, albeit smaller than during the pandemic.

Regarding youth unemployment: tackling youth unemployment, a pre-pandemic issue incorporated into the NPO, remains a focus. According to the fifth evaluation, institutions have used NPO funds to enhance career orientation and counselling. Research on the approach to youth unemployment shows that young people experience the guidance offered as positive.

#### **2024 Completed**

The NPO ran until 2024.

## **Bodies responsible**

- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- Council for upper secondary VET schools (MBO Raad)

## Target group

### Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices  
Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)

### Education professionals

Teachers

## Thematic categories

### Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

## European priorities in VET

### Osnabrück Declaration

Resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible  
VET

## Subsystem

IVET

## Further reading

[Annex to policy letter on the National education programme, support programme for recovery and perspective, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 17 February 2021](#)

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[Administrative agreement NPO - VET and HE, 21 May 2021](#)

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[First report on the progress of NPO, 28 October 2021](#)

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[Service document and guideline action approach Corona VET](#)

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[Second evaluative report monitoring the implementation of the NPO - Berenschot, 1 November 2022](#)

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[Second evaluative report monitoring the macro effects of the NPO - ResearchNEd, SEO, KBA, Regioplan, ROA, 17 November 2022](#)

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[Cost-benefit analysis of the effects of NPO on VET and higher education, SEO, May 2023](#)

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[Fourth evaluative report monitoring the implementation of the NPO, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, May 2023](#)

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[Fifth evaluative report monitoring the implementation of the NPO, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, November 2023](#)


## Related policy developments

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## 2025 Implementation

### Tackling youth unemployment

In the Cabinet's response, 14 measures were announced that focus on tackling youth unemployment and preventing early leaving from education and training. The most significant measures that focus on employment are:

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#### Type of development

Strategy/Action  
plan

#### Subsystem

IVET CVET

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## 2024 Completed

### Action plan for equal opportunities in education

In response to a range of surveys showing that students do not always have equal opportunities, and the trend of growing inequality, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science submitted to parliament in October 2016 an action plan for equal opportunities in education.

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Strategy/Action  
plan

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IVET CVET

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<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/41985>