

Stimulating lifelong learning in SMEs

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 NETHERLANDS

Timeline

2020 Implementation 2021 Implementation 2022 Implementation
2023 Implementation 2024 Implementation 2025 Implementation

ID number 36276

Background

Compared to larger companies, it is less common for employees of SMEs to participate in training activities, as employers have little time, money and experience to support and advise their employees.

Companies find it hard to recruit new staff, in particular workers with a technical background. Shortages of beta-technical staff cannot be solved by recruiting technically trained VET school leavers.

Learning and development in SMEs (*SLIM-regeling*) is not the first initiative to stimulate lifelong learning in SMEs. Earlier measures of the government to support the reskilling and upskilling of SME employees and facilitate lifelong learning in SMEs in the technology sector became part of the Techniekpact (Technology pact). These measures are part of the multi-annual action programme on lifelong learning. Techniekpact is a joint action of several ministries, led by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, to reduce shortages of technical personnel in the technology sector. The pact, signed in 2013, united the ambitions of the existing plans and initiatives and contains a set of agreements between the business community (social partners), education and the government to improve the link between education and the labour market.

Objectives

One of the priorities of the labour ministry is to stimulate the employability of SME employees. The budget of the Learning and development incentive scheme for SMEs (*SLIM-regeling*) is dedicated to creating learning environments within companies and to facilitate employees engaging in (parts of) a VET course in working time.

The objective of the Ministry of Economic Affairs is to mitigate shortages of technical staff by stimulating SMEs to engage in retraining and upskilling activities.

Description

The labour ministry took action to stimulate lifelong learning in SMEs by launching the Learning and development incentive scheme for SMEs (*SLIM-regeling*) in 2020. SME

entrepreneurs can apply for a subsidy up to EUR 25 000. The total amount allocated to the scheme is EUR 50 million. Larger companies (non-SMEs) in the hospitality, agriculture and recreation sectors can also apply for a subsidy, as well as partnerships of SMEs, sector organisations, sector training funds, education institutions or employees' and employers' associations. For example, they can apply to jointly develop a partnership to train (new) staff within a company (in-company school).

2020 Implementation

The SLIM scheme is in implementation phase. SME entrepreneurs were able to apply for a subsidy within the SLIM scheme in March 2020. Partnerships and larger companies could apply between April and June 2020. Applicants can apply for subsidies for the following activities:

- (a) screening of the company (diagnosing the knowledge and skills needed and constructing a schooling plan);
- (b) acquiring career advices for workers in an SME company;
- (c) supporting the development/implementation of an approach to stimulate employees in the company to further develop their knowledge, skills and professional attitude during their work;
- (d) offering positions to study and learn in practice for the adult learning pathway in VET (*derde leerweg*)

2021 Implementation

The first evaluation report (baseline measurement) showed that 2 294 applications were submitted. 756 grants were awarded, of which 673 (32% of all applications in this category) were awarded to SMEs, 10 (59% success rate) to large companies and 73 to partnerships (45% success rate). Analysis shows that there was a good spread across sectors, regions and company size. Only companies with one to five employees were underrepresented. In March and September 2021, the third and fourth rounds for individual SMEs opened. Partnerships (and large companies) could apply for a second round in June 2021.

The next rounds will be in March and September 2022 for individual SMEs and in June for partnerships (and larger companies). There will be an interim evaluation report in 2023. In 2025, after all subsidized activities have been undertaken, a final evaluation report will follow.

2022 Implementation

The measure is operational and runs as a regular practice.

2023 Implementation

The subsidy ceiling for grants for partnerships, is increased from EUR 17.5 million to EUR 20.5 million for the current period. This allows the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) to fund a larger portion of the submitted projects.

The subsidy ceiling for grants for small and medium-sized enterprises, is raised from EUR 14.2 million to EUR 14.57 million for the period starting in September 2023.

2024 Implementation

In April 2024, an interim evaluation report was published, confirming that the implementation of the SLIM initiative is proceeding as planned, with results being sustained. Activity C (the development and implementation of methods to stimulate employee growth) has been the most widely adopted by companies and partnerships. This primarily includes the implementation of systems for personal development discussions and methods to encourage knowledge sharing. Most respondents reported completing all planned activities, with exceptions mainly due to COVID-19-related

disruptions or, to a lesser extent, changes in project focus or time constraints. Nearly all respondents also confirmed that project outcomes are being sustained, often integrated into regular policies or, in partnerships, through incorporation into individual companies.

The evaluation highlights clear positive effects of the SLIM initiative on learning and development. Both individual SMEs and partnerships experienced significant improvements, as reflected in initial and follow-up assessments. Notable outcomes include:

- (a) Clearer strategies within business policies, with increased allocation of time and budgets for learning and development.
- (b) Enhanced insights into staff competencies and aspirations, resulting in more tailored and effective learning opportunities.
- (c) Improvements in learning culture traits, with SMEs dedicating more time and resources to training and development, and a rise in employee participation in these activities compared to pre-SLIM levels.

New application rounds took place in March and September 2024 for individual SMEs and in June 2024 for partnerships and larger companies. On 26 June 2024, the subsidy ceiling for individual SME applications for the September round was increased from EUR 13.5 million to EUR 16.13 million.

For the partnerships category, the budget for the June 2024 application period was exceeded, with over EUR 33 million in subsidy requests against an available budget of EUR 17.5 million. To accommodate more projects, the ministry allocated an additional EUR 5 million. For large companies in the agriculture, hospitality, and recreation sectors, EUR 0.8 million in subsidies were requested, against a budget of EUR 1.2 million. In November 2024, the minister of social affairs and employment (SZW) responded to the interim evaluation in a policy letter on lifelong learning. The minister confirmed that the positive outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of the SLIM scheme and announced the intention to continue the scheme beyond the current period. From 2025 onwards, an annual budget of EUR 35–40 million will be made available for new applications.

2025 Implementation

As of 1 January 2025, the SLIM scheme has been extended. The scheme supports initiatives that promote learning and development in SMEs, including applications submitted by partnerships within the SME sector. In 2025, a total budget of EUR 45 million is available: EUR 25 million for individual applications (across two application periods) and EUR 20 million for partnerships.

Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment

Target group

Entities providing VET

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

Thematic categories

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Financial and non-financial incentives to learners, providers and companies

European priorities in VET

Osnabrück Declaration

Establishing a new lifelong learning culture - relevance of continuing VET and digitalisation

Subsystem

CVET

Further reading

[Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, SLIM scheme, news item](#)

[Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, SLIM scheme](#)

[Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, SLIM scheme, website for employers](#)

[Evaluation of SLIM scheme - baseline measurement 2020 - 26 April 2021](#)

[Interim evaluation report SLIM subsidy scheme SEOR & Ockham IPS](#)

[Policy letter on Lifelong Learning, 21 November 2024](#)

[Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, SLIM scheme 2025-2029, website for employers](#)

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

2025 Implementation

Facilitating access to VET for adults

In 2015 and 2016, following letters to parliament on the progress of lifelong learning policy, the Cabinet announced its intention to make upper secondary VET and higher education programmes more flexible and tailor-made.

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Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET CVET

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