

# Measures to promote lifelong learning

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 NETHERLANDS

## Timeline



ID number 36256

## Background

The government intends to promote lifelong learning (LLL) to encourage people to take better control of their career and professional life. Several measures are being developed to increase enrolment in LLL. They aim to develop more suitable VET programmes for working and non-working adults, and stimulate participation in LLL by increasing and improving access to funding.

## Objectives

The government aims to:

- (a) improve the links between the demand and supply side of the adult training market;
- (b) increase participation in funded lifelong development activities, for instance by replacing the tax training deduction scheme with a subsidy: the STAP budget (*Stimulans ArbeidsmarktPositie*).

Through the Subsidy scheme for flexible vocational education third pathway VET, the education and labour ministries intend to stimulate public and private VET institutions and emerging new (regional) forms of cooperation to join forces. The education programmes, working methods and materials developed with the subsidy will be widely disseminated for the benefit of other senior secondary VET programmes. The subsidy is also intended to fund activities or tools reaching target groups and to motivate them to follow (parts of) VET courses.

The objective of the pilot in demand funding for VET is to stimulate more adults to join VET training and retraining courses. This pilot aims to investigate:

- (a) whether and how demand-based funding contributes to increasing the participation of adults in VET, to their study success and their satisfaction with VET education;
- (b) whether there are indications that demand-based funding contributes positively to (regardless of whether they are a funded or non-funded VET institution) the offer of courses adapted to adult learners by VET colleges.

In 2020, the government introduced an integrated and broad LLL policy, addressing four major challenges that form the four pillars of this policy approach:

- (a) further strengthening the demand for professional development among individuals;
- (b) stimulating the role of employers and social partners in learning and development;
- (c) promoting the development of a more flexible supply for learning and development;
- (d) stimulating the development of a learning culture.

## Description

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.

On the supply side, the education ministry has introduced three initiatives to stimulate the development of flexible VET and higher professional education courses, responding to the needs of (working) adults.

Through the Subsidy scheme for flexible vocational education third pathway VET, the government has made EUR 20 million available over four years for the development of innovative and flexible VET programmes for employees and jobseekers. Its beneficiaries are partnerships of funded and non-funded VET institutions in the adult learning pathway; this pathway is known as the third learning pathway (*derde leerweg*), alongside the school-based learning pathway and the dual pathway. In this third pathway, adults can follow a fully-fledged VET course aiming to obtain a VET diploma, or a certificate if only parts of the VET course have been followed. The third pathway is attractive for adults and creates linkages between publicly funded VET colleges and private VET institutions. Legal regulations for teaching time and course duration do not apply in this pathway, therefore colleges can offer flexible education trajectories. The subsidy is also intended for activities or tools and instruments for reaching target groups to motivate them to join (parts of) VET training courses. It is expected that the subsidy scheme will give a further impulse to the development of a (regionally) flexible and attractive training offer for employees and jobseekers.

The Lifelong learning action programme, launched by the education ministry in 2018, aims to support VET colleges to engage (more) in LLL activities. The LLL Action programme has also been set up by the ministry, and the Knowledge point VET lifelong learning scheme, to support VET colleges in engaging in LLL by explaining the possibilities available within the rules of the programme and by sharing good examples. The focus of this action programme is both on public and private VET colleges.

The pilot for issuing certificates for the vocational elements of a VET course has been extended. From May 2019, partnerships between VET institutions, companies and social partners could submit new proposals for this pilot. The responsible body is the Cooperation organisation for vocational education, training and the labour market (SBB).

On the demand side, two main initiatives are being developed.

The STAP budget (*Stimulans ArbeidsmarktPositie*) is a subsidy scheme replacing the tax training deduction scheme. Demand-based financing could help achieve a breakthrough in LLL policies in the Netherlands. For this reason, the demand financing pilot in higher education will be continued and extended to secondary VET. Demand-based financing will enable adults to buy the training that suits them. The education and labour ministries want to give shape to the pilot within the STAP scheme. The scheme includes the possibility of using the STAP budget for secondary VET, which is organised in the so-called third learning pathway. Within the STAP scheme, it is possible to finance multi-year programmes. Priority will be given for setting up multi-annual courses, particularly for adults. The STAP budget is limited to a maximum of EUR 1 000 per year per person. The most important stakeholders, apart from the ministries, are the Council for upper secondary VET schools (*MBO Raad*), The Council for private providers of education and training (NRTO) and the National Association of Employers (VNO-NCW/MKB Nederland).

The proposal for the introduction of learning rights to finance the training of adult workers and jobseekers has been developed by the Council for upper secondary VET schools (*MBO Raad*), The Council for private providers of education and training (NRTO) and the national

umbrella organisation of the social partners (Stichting van de Arbeid) will be involved in discussions in the coming months on future-proof funding of formal (higher) education for adults and alternatives to the current funding of adult diploma-oriented pathways.

For expenses for the training and development of their employees, employers can appeal to the specific exemptions for training costs within the labour costs scheme (Wages Tax Act 1964).

### 2019 Pilot

The pilots of Subsidy scheme for flexible vocational education third pathway VET and the financing of the demand side are being implemented and further developed.

### 2020 Implementation

In 2020, existing and new measures were integrated in a broad LLL policy, along with measures to mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market and economy. A new, integrated long-term perspective on LLL has been developed. The main measures are described in each pillar of the Roadmap on learning and development.

New measures are: the NL continues learning programme (*NL leert door*), a programme of free of charge development advice for individuals; a social package as part of the third COVID-19 support; and a recovery package. Extra attention is being paid to training with a focus on sectors facing structural labour shortages.

Pillar 1 contains measures strengthening the demand for professional development among individuals and stimulating self-efficacy.

A STAP development advice tool (*Ontwikkeladvies*) is being developed as an additional measure to the STAP budget and is meant to be available for groups that need more support, for instance the low-educated or the elderly. Until the STAP development advice is launched in 2021, the free of charge advice from NL continues learning (*NL leert door*) will remain available.

Crisis measures include the extra funding for the NL continues learning programme and temporary training funding for individuals entitled to unemployment benefits.

Pillar 2 contains measures stimulating the role of employers and social partners in learning and development.

Collective labour agreements increasingly contain elements about stimulating employees' self-management by introducing individual learning or development budgets. The government is actively informing labour market parties about these possibilities.

Creating a learning culture in SME's is being promoted by two schemes: the SLIM and *MKB!dee*. Strengthening the basic skills of employees (language, numeracy, digital skills) is being supported by extending the existing programme on basic skills. In addition, the government, together with social partners, has agreed on an action plan to create a breakthrough in mapping skills.

Measures addressing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic include a tailor-made scheme for partnerships supporting individuals threatened with dismissal to find new work, a retraining scheme for enterprises in sectors with structural labour shortages and extra funding for attending the dual pathway (apprenticeships) is also available.

Pillar 3 contains measures stimulating the development of a more flexible supply for learning and development. It deals with the supply side of education and training and consists of three types of measures responding to the needs of (working) and stimulating the development of flexible VET and higher professional education courses:

- (a) flexibilisation of offer in upper secondary VET and higher education;

- (b) tailor-made practical training for learners and students with learning difficulties;
- (c) support to education institutions.

The newly introduced measures include the tailor-made learning routes in the dual pathway initiative for workers and jobseekers who do not have a diploma or certificate. Taking part in on-the-job VET training can be a stepping stone to a job and/or further learning in VET. This learning route is completed with a statement of practice by the employer, containing the work processes the student learned to perform. This initiative is being piloted by several VET colleges.

The Lifelong learning action programme, launched by the ministry of education in 2018, aims to support VET colleges to further engage in LLL activities. The programme was restarted in 2020 due to its relevance in mitigating the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The LLL Action programme is mainly a knowledge sharing programme focussing on developing courses and sharing good practices.

Measures related to COVID-19 include extra funding for short-term training and retraining through the dual pathway in VET and extra attention for the development of VET certificates by the Cooperation organisation for vocational education, training and the labour market (SBB).

Pillar 4 contains measures to stimulate a learning culture.

Both the regular measures and the crisis measures in this pillar are communication measures, such as campaigns that aim at increasing acquaintance with these measures and awareness of the importance of LLL.

### 2021 Implementation

The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB) presented its aspirations for lifelong development in VET. The bidbook offers ten concrete and coherent proposals to enhance the lifelong development of adults.

The parliament made additional investments to guide people to new jobs, facilitate retraining and further education, and combat poverty and debt. Part of this additional investment is the subsidy scheme for learning on the job in the third pathway (*de derde leerweg*). With this subsidy scheme, employers receive compensation for providing apprenticeships for job seekers or employees at risk of unemployment.

### 2022 Implementation

In February 2022, it was announced that from March 1st 2022 both working and unemployed adults, can apply for subsidies in the STAP budget (*Stimulans ArbeidsmarktPositie*) subsidy scheme, which replaces the tax training deduction scheme. Under certain conditions, a maximum subsidy of EUR 1000 per year is available to each applicant.

As of March 2022, the STAP budget became available and was immediately extremely popular: the budget (EUR 32 million) was spent in three days. The use of STAP is closely monitored and evaluated. Three improvements have already been identified:

- a more prominent role was given to the accreditation marks in order to both monitor the quality and labour market orientation of the training offered and to prevent that trainers and courses, that do not meet STAP's conditions, enter the training register;
- the tighter design of the STAP scheme so that abuse and improper use are prevented as much as possible, for example, by limiting the number of granted applications per course;
- quick and firm enforcement afterwards in case of abuse.

Regarding the further development of STAP, priority is given to two areas: financing of trajectories for the recognition of acquired competencies (*Erkenning van eerder*

*verworven competenties, EVC*) and financing multi-year training activities.

In September 2022, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment shared their ambitions regarding lifelong learning. According to the policy brief on Lifelong development policy, 1.2 billion is invested for the period 2022 to 2027 in order to stimulate a lifelong learning culture. Through three coherent policies, people, companies and trainers are encouraged to engage in training:

- People are better supported in their own development by the simplification and expanding of the public funding of training, making additional support available for the most vulnerable people, and providing reliable, up-to-date and as complete as possible information on public and private training and financing options.
- Companies are supported in shaping a learning-rich working environment and in scaling up successful initiatives. In order to facilitate the various forms of learning and development in the workplace, subsidy schemes exist to finance on-the-job learning guidance, basic skills training and other forms of upskilling, retraining and further training.
- Trainers are encouraged to better align the provision with the wishes and needs of workers and job seekers. For instance, by developing and scaling up short training programmes and matching training to learning and work experience already gained.

### **2023 Implementation**

The government decided to skip the January 2023 application period for the STAP budget to allow additional time for implementing measures aimed at reducing abuse and misuse. The STAP budget allocated for 2023 remained unchanged and was redistributed to later application periods within the same year.

Later in 2023, according to the Letter to the House of Representatives on the Allocation of Remaining STAP Funds in 2023 the government announced that the STAP budget would be discontinued after 2023. For the remaining budget in 2023, only applications for (parts of) education programmes officially recognised by the Ministry of Education were deemed eligible for subsidies.

To address the gap left by the discontinued STAP budget, the government plans to introduce a temporary provision within the SLIM scheme, focusing on critical sectors such as healthcare, technology, and energy transition. Additionally, three potential options for long-term individual learning and development support are under exploration: a voucher, a learning account, and a learning right. These options are being evaluated based on their specific characteristics, costs, effectiveness, flexibility, and implementation timelines. These measures are part of a larger strategy to promote lifelong learning by integrating formal education, improving accessibility, and focusing on skill development in critical labour market areas.

According to the Parliamentary Letter on Follow-Up Policy for Lifelong Learning and Development from November 2023, the Dutch government has outlined its initiatives and plans to enhance lifelong learning (LLO) to address labour market demands, foster innovation, and support individual skill development.

Key pillars include:

**Improving Accessibility:** the government aims to increase awareness of lifelong learning opportunities, such as the lifelong learning credit, through the Learning Overview website (*Leeroverzicht*). Launched in late 2022, this centralized online platform provides comprehensive information on public and private training programmes and financing options, and is continually updated.

**Financial support:** funding options have been expanded, notably through the SLIM subsidy scheme, which encourages small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to cultivate learning cultures within their organizations.

**Programmes for Employers:** the Learning culture programme (*Programma Leercultuur*),

launched in November 2023, is aimed at organisations, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It supports businesses in fostering a learning culture by raising awareness and emphasising the value of lifelong learning (LLL) for organisational growth and development. The Learning culture programme builds on the foundation laid by the SLIM subsidy scheme, which promotes lifelong learning (*Leven Lang Ontwikkelen LLO*) in the business sector, with a particular focus on SMEs. The programme aims to increase awareness of the importance of learning and development and to encourage action through improved coordination, knowledge sharing, and communication about LLL. It focuses on four main areas:

- (a) agenda setting: raise awareness about the importance of LLL through targeted communication tools.
- (b) inspiration and motivation: provide practical tools and sessions to make the concept of a learning culture more tangible.
- (c) support and facilitation: offer accessible tools, like the QuickScan Learning Culture, to assess and utilize support such as the SLIM subsidy.
- (d) knowledge sharing and development: organize events and fund projects to disseminate knowledge on lifelong learning and employability.

Regional and Sectoral Collaborations: Recognising that formal post-secondary education is underutilised in LLL, with most training being non-formal and delivered by private institutions, the government introduced an LLL Education agenda to integrate formal education into lifelong learning. The ministries highlight the potential benefits of formal education, especially in terms of providing individuals with valuable documents for better positioning in the job market. The agenda aims to gradually facilitate the integration of formal education into *LLL*, considering the intertwined nature of work, learning, and innovation. The agenda consists of seven steps.

- (a) simplifying participation in formal education components.
- (b) expanding the legal mandate for *LLL*.
- (c) removing barriers to delivering private *LLL* activities within public institutions.
- (d) promoting the use of micro-credentials and certificates.
- (e) enhancing the connection between informal, non-formal, and formal learning.
- (f) improving collaboration between businesses and educational institutions.
- (g) encouraging work and learning through vocational and dual higher education.

The agenda comprises both exploratory steps and actions that are already underway. The initial four steps involve fundamental policy, legal, and regulatory explorations, with a two-year timeframe, and decisions will be made by the next government upon completion. The remaining three steps focus on current practices to increase the contribution of formal education to *LLL*, with active collaboration between public and private educational providers, employers, and social partners.

### 2024 Implementation

Apart from the progress achieved in fostering LLL through the programme Lifelong learning catalyst, and promoting lifelong learning within SMEs, no additional developments have been reported.

## Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- Council for upper secondary VET schools (MBO Raad)
- Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market (SBB)
- Council for private providers of education and training (NRTO)
- National association of employers (VNO-NCW/MKB Nederland)
- National umbrella organisation of social partners (Stichting van de Arbeid)

# Target group

## Learners

Adult learners  
Unemployed and jobseekers  
Persons in employment, including those at risk of unemployment

# Thematic categories

## Modernising VET offer and delivery

Modernising VET standards, curricula, programmes and training courses  
Acquiring key competences  
Reinforcing work-based learning, including apprenticeships

## Transparency and portability of VET skills and qualifications

Learners' possibilities of accumulation, validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired non-formally and informally

## Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Providing for individuals' re- and upskilling needs  
Lifelong guidance  
Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

# European priorities in VET

## VET Recommendation

VET agile in adapting to labour market challenges

## Osnabrück Declaration

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

# Subsystem

CVET

# Further reading

[Policy letter on lifelong learning, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare and Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2019](#)

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[Subsidy scheme, Flexibilisation of vocational training for adults](#)

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[More flexible education for adults in VET, news item](#)

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[Newsletter of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science on lifelong learning, No 1, July 2019](#)

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Policy letter about progress on individual learning budgets and flexibilisation of courses on offer, Ministry of Social Welfare and Employment, 3 June 2019

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Policy letter, Roadmap on learning and development, Ministry of Social Welfare and Employment and the education ministry, 13 November 2020

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Bidbook lifelong development for adults in vocational education, Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market, 6 September 2021

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Website of the national government with instructions to apply for the STAP subsidy

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Policy letter on progress of STAP (April 2022)

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Policy letter on progress of STAP (November 2022)

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Policy letter on how to address shortages on the labour market (June 2022)

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Policy letter on ambitions lifelong learning (September 2022)

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Policy letter on skipping January STAP period (December 2022)

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Policy letter ministry of social affairs and employment & education ministry on remaining STAP-subsidy funds (July 2023)

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Policy letter ministry of social affairs and employment & education ministry on progress lifelong learning policy (November 2023)

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## Related policy developments

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### 2024 Design

#### Development of the common skills language: CompetentNL

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.

 NETHERLANDS

##### Type of development

Practical  
measure/Initiative

##### Subsystem

CVET

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### 2024 Implementation

#### Lifelong learning catalyst

The Lifelong learning catalyst (*LLO katalysator*) is an initiative of VET colleges, applied universities and research universities to boost life-long learning nationally and regionally.

 NETHERLANDS

**Type of development**

Practical  
measure/Initiative

**Subsystem**

CVET

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2024 Implementation

**Stimulating lifelong learning in SMEs**

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.

 NETHERLANDS

**Type of development**

Practical  
measure/Initiative

**Subsystem**

CVET

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2024 Implementation

**Promoting literacy, mathematics and digital competences for adults**

The Count on Skills (*Tel mee met Taa!*) action plans for 2016-2019 and 2020-2024 both aimed to combat low literacy in the Netherlands.

 NETHERLANDS

**Type of development**

Strategy/Action  
plan

**Subsystem**

CVET

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2024 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.

 NETHERLANDS

**Type of development**

Practical  
measure/Initiative

**Subsystem**

IVET CVET

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“ … ” **Cite as**

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