

Facilitating access to VET for adults

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL MEASURE/INITIATIVE

 NETHERLANDS

Timeline



ID number 28448

Description

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. This would be done through voucher experiments (pilots) in higher education and the introduction of certificates (parts of a full diploma/qualification) in upper secondary, non-publicly financed VET. The measures are intended to make VET more accessible for adults.

Private VET suppliers are allowed to award parts of a qualification only, to make VET more accessible to adult learners. The Cooperation organisation for vocational education, training and the labour market (SBB) identified optional subjects (*keuzedelen*) that can be awarded in this way. These optional subjects need to have a stand-alone significance for the labour market, which means that they also have a relevance separate from other qualification modules.

2015 Design

2016 Implementation

The first set of 38 optional subjects was selected in 2016 (including entrepreneurship and leadership).

In September 2016, a commission (*Commissie Sap*) was set up to prepare advice for the government on vouchers in upper secondary VET. The commission was invited to come up with suggestions on how to promote lifelong learning (LLL) in upper secondary VET and on the advantages and disadvantages of financial incentives for adult learners.

2017 Implementation

The commission (*Commissie Sap*) delivered its advice in April 2017. The advice identified the main conditions for supporting adults in LLL: financial resources, sufficient time available, a transparent and high-quality education and training offer

that fits the needs of adults and an environment that stimulates education and development. Creating these conditions should be a joint responsibility of the government, employers, training institutions and the adults themselves. The commission concluded that funding the demand side is an effective tool for supporting LLL for adults. Three funding options were suggested:

- (a) tax facilities;
- (b) training vouchers;
- (c) individual learning accounts.

2018 Implementation

In 2018, a pilot was launched to test the possibility of awarding certificates not only for optional subjects (*keuzedelen*) but also for the standard vocational qualification components. The certificates were expected to enable workers and jobseekers to strengthen their labour market position. In this pilot, 14 vocational- oriented certificates were developed and validated by the ministry.

2019 Implementation

As a follow up to the commission's (*Commissie Sap*) advice, the education and labour ministries have launched a multi-annual programme for LLL aiming to raise awareness, promote LLL programmes and help individuals participate in LLL. A total of EUR 10.15 million was earmarked for 2019 to:

- (a) develop a portal providing an overview of available training programmes (EUR 1.4 million);
- (b) promote LLL in SMEs (EUR 1.5 million);
- (c) upgrade the Working and learning desks programme supporting jobseekers and employers (EUR 1.4 million);
- (d) introduce flexible education pathways for adults in secondary VET (EUR 5 million);
- (e) monitor and evaluate activities (EUR 0.85 million).

In February 2019, certification via non-publicly funded VET institutes was possible for 120 optional subjects (*keuzedelen*).

Further, 24 extra certificates for standard vocational qualification components were developed, again in a pilot. The pilot is open to both public and private VET colleges. The coordination and responsible body is the SBB.

Additionally, in December 2019, the Dutch Parliament was informed about a new approach to elective modules. This approach introduced various measures, including greater flexibility for VET schools to integrate existing and new optional subjects into their educational programmes. This approach consists of various measures, one of which provides more flexibility for VET schools in incorporating existing and new optional subjects into their educational programmes.

2020 Implementation

Certificates that were developed in earlier pilots were made available via the SBB qualifications portal.

At the request of the education ministry, SBB is investigating the methodology for drawing up certificates for standard vocational components of VET qualifications that have an independent significance in the labour market and thus contribute to lifelong development for workers and jobseekers. An interim report is foreseen in 2021 and a final report in 2025.

2021 Implementation

Certificates for standard vocational qualification components continue to be

developed. In 2021, 54 certificates were made available and accessible via the SBB qualifications portal.

The Netherlands welcomes the EC work towards a European approach to micro-credentials. The position paper (2021), on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, states that, although micro-credentials are no alternative to full degree programmes in Dutch initial education, they can create interesting new possibilities for all learners, including contributing to smooth transitions and increased permeability between VET and higher education.

2022 Implementation

Certificates for standard vocational qualification components continue to be developed. In 2022, 72 new certificates were made available and accessible via the SBB qualifications portal.

2023 Implementation

Following the 2019 initiative to decouple optional subjects (elective modules) from specific qualifications in the Dutch VET system, plans are underway to remove the link between optional subjects and qualifications entirely. This change will enable schools, in consultation with businesses, to independently determine which optional subjects to offer for each programme. Implementing this decoupling requires a legislative amendment, which has been included in a broader bill.

The bill entered public consultation around the summer of 2023, with the internet consultation remaining open until 25 September 2023. As a result, the new target date for implementation is set for 1 August 2025.

2024 Implementation

On the topic of microcredentials, within the framework of Npuls (a national programme in the Netherlands focused on innovation and digitalisation in education) and in close collaboration with the Council for Upper Secondary VET Schools (MBO Raad), many VET colleges launched a pilot for microcredentials in March 2024. The pilot will run until 31 December 2025.

A key principle of the pilot is that VET colleges operate based on pre-established agreements, ensuring quality assurance and standardised methods for issuing certificates. This approach enhances the transferability of microcredentials across schools and educational sectors, including higher education institutions such as universities, while ensuring their desired civil effect in the Netherlands and across the EU. Establishing a single standard fosters clarity and builds trust among stakeholders.

The pilot aims to provide valuable insights into the potential added value of microcredentials for vocational education and will inform recommendations for their integration into the VET system. This initiative is being carried out in collaboration with the project "Building on microcredentials in higher education", which also falls under the Npuls programme.

In the interest of transparency and accessibility in education, VET schools were required to register their programmes and certificates on the platforms RIO or EDU-DEX by summer 2024. This aimed to ensure a comprehensive and accurate representation of national training options and certifications on the centralised platform, *Leeroverzicht.nl*. Accurate and consistent registration is essential to reflect the true landscape of VET education and support informed decision-making.

However, many institutions have not yet updated or fully registered their programmes, and inconsistencies in the registration of VET certificates have been observed. To address these shortcomings and provide a complete view of available certifications, the education ministry and *Leeroverzicht* (Learning overview) have urged VET schools to prioritise completing and standardising their registrations.

Moreover, to address critical workforce shortages in sectors such as childcare, healthcare, technology, and green space management, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in collaboration with sector organisations and the education ministry, introduced sectoral development paths in 2024. These paths provide step-by-step guidance for workers and job seekers, outlining role progression and highlighting relevant educational programmes. The initiative aims to reduce staffing shortages, facilitate job seekers' reintegration, and strengthen positions in the labour market.

2025 Implementation

According to a 2025 mid-term evaluation by the research agency AEF, among the 27 schools taking part in the microcredentials pilot since April 2024, 17 MBO schools have already developed a total of 24 microcredentials. Several schools are now ready to start issuing them. Collaboration with the labour market is central: in 13 of the 17 schools, the demand for microcredentials came directly from regional employers, especially in shortage sectors like healthcare. In many cases, development occurs in co-creation with employers, who are also involved in assessment and delivery. Quality assurance is essential. Schools underline the need to meet national quality standards, even though operating with a national framework that grants substantial autonomy is a new experience for many VET institutions. The pilot runs until the end of 2025. A final evaluation by AEF is planned to be conducted in autumn 2025, involving schools, learners, and employers. The broader movement around microcredentials continues to grow across VET and higher education.

Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- Commission on demand-based funding VET (Commissie vraagfinanciering mbo)
- Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market (SBB)

Target group

Learners

Adult learners

Thematic categories

Transparency and portability of VET skills and qualifications

Developing and applying qualifications smaller/shorter than full

European priorities in VET

VET Recommendation

Flexibility and progression opportunities at the core of VET

Osnabrück Declaration

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

Subsystem

Further reading

[Letters to parliament](#)

[Certification](#)

[Commission](#)

[Overview of current experiments and pilots, education ministry \(Overzicht van lopende experimenten en pilots OCW\), 12 October 2020](#)

[Portal for certificates of the Cooperation organisation for VET and the labour market \(SBB\)](#)

[Position paper by the Netherlands in the context of the public consultation of the European Commission on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. Education Ministry, 8 July 2021](#)

[Newsletter by the education ministry on the availability of new certificates in VET, 24 February 2022](#)

[Newsletter by the education ministry on the availability of new certificates in VET, May 2022](#)

[Newsletter by the education ministry on the availability of new certificates in VET, September 2022](#)

[News article by the education ministry on proposed change in law unlinking optional subjects and qualifications, January 2023](#)

[News article by the education ministry on internet consultation improving connection education and the labour market, September 2023](#)

[News article by the education ministry on the registration of the supply of VET certificates for Leeroverzicht.nl, May 2024](#)

[Article on microcredentials in VET on website Npuls](#)

[News article by Council for Upper Secondary VET Schools \(MBO Raad\) on the progress of the microcredentials pilot in VET, February 2025](#)

Related policy developments

2025 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

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.

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Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

CVET

“ ... ” Cite as

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