

Basic skills of VET students

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGY/ACTION PLAN

 NETHERLANDS

Timeline

2023 Implementation

2024 Implementation

2025 Implementation

ID number 46813

Background

International studies, like the PISA study from 2022, reveal a sharp decline in youngsters' basic skills, particularly in Dutch language and arithmetic/mathematics. External factors such as outdated curricula, teacher shortages, societal changes, and reduced library access exacerbate the problem. Basic skills are essential for full participation in society. The Masterplan basic skills (2022) is a comprehensive policy programme designed to address this issue across all school levels, including vocational education and training.

Objectives

The objectives of the Masterplan basic skills, as described in the relevant 2022 policy letter from the Minister of education to the Parliament, are:

- (a) to improve proficiency in basic skills (Dutch, maths, citizenship, digital literacy) across all education levels, including primary, secondary, and vocational education.
- (b) to develop a holistic, collaborative approach involving teachers, school leaders, parents, libraries, and policymakers.

Description

The Masterplan basic skills from 2022 focuses on enhancing education through five key pillars:

- (a) supporting educators with resources and training,
- (b) providing evidence-based learning materials,
- (c) strengthening school-community links,
- (d) implementing monitoring systems,
- (e) and establishing clear curriculum guidelines.

Immediate actions include creating support teams for schools and launching subsidies for targeted interventions. The plan aims for long-term integration with national programmes like the NPO and regular curriculum reviews. With a EUR 1 billion commitment, the Dutch government emphasises reducing administrative burdens, improving teacher training, and fostering collaboration to achieve equitable and improved educational outcomes.

As part of the broader plan to support VET students in acquiring basic skills, a decree published on 9 February 2022, introduced significant changes to VET in the Netherlands, focusing on revised arithmetic requirements, assessment modifications, and integration into graduation criteria. New VET arithmetic levels (*mbo-rekenniveaus*) outline specific arithmetic competencies, while entry-level students are now being assessed on a pass/fail basis rather than numerical grades. Since 1 August 2022, achieving a pass in arithmetic became mandatory for VET graduation, ensuring students are equipped with essential quantitative skills for the labour market.

In 2023, the Minister for Education sent to the parliament the report 'Professional background of MBO teachers basic skills and citizenship' from the Expertise Centre for Vocational Education (ECBO) to discuss his approach to further strengthening basic skills in secondary vocational education (MBO).

2023 Implementation

The Policy Letter Approach to Basic Skills in Vocational Education and Training (VET) from 2023 presents a strategic framework, outlining the Dutch government's strategy for addressing declining proficiency in basic skills (Dutch language, mathematics, citizenship, and digital literacy) among vocational education and training (VET) students. The programme is designed to strengthen education quality, improve teacher support, and monitor student outcomes, as described in the relevant policy letter of the Minister of Education to the Parliament from July 2023. It consists of three main action points:

Strengthening the quality of skills education and examination

The first action includes revisions to the national curriculum for Dutch language, mathematics, and citizenship to ensure alignment with vocational needs and societal challenges. Examination standards are being improved to better assess core competencies, while pilot projects explore innovative approaches, such as project-based learning, to integrate basic skills into vocational contexts.

Strengthening the quality of VET teachers of basic skills

The second action focuses on mandatory professional development for MBO teachers to enhance their ability to teach basic skills effectively. This action also includes a €30 million annual investment to support teacher training, the provision of resources, and the establishment of a national network to improve teaching methods in language, mathematics, and citizenship.

Monitoring the ability level of basic skills of VET students

The third action point involves establishing a comprehensive monitoring system to track student progress in basic skills, generating valuable data for targeted interventions. Collaboration with the Education Inspectorate ensures the creation of standardized assessment frameworks, and regular evaluations are incorporated to maintain the effectiveness and relevance of policies.

The strategic framework sets out that immediate reforms will introduce new curriculum standards and examination requirements starting in the 2024-2025 academic year. It aims for all MBO students to graduate with at least a 2F proficiency level in Dutch and mathematics, alongside strong citizenship and digital literacy skills. This approach will enable students to participate fully in society and adapt to labour market demands. The comprehensive framework seeks to reverse the decline in basic skills and enhance the quality of vocational education. By 2026, the monitoring system will deliver its first results, with a mid-term evaluation assessing progress and recommending adjustments.

The policy letter proposes an annual allocation of EUR 30 million for teacher professionalization, additional funding for research and curriculum development, and collaboration between MBO institutions, policymakers, and researchers to ensure evidence-based practices.

Further initiatives in this direction include the establishment of an expert group by the Minister of Education in 2023 to recalibrate qualification requirements and review Dutch as a core skill in VET, building on the updated arithmetic requirements introduced in 2022.

Another initiative supporting the advancement of basic skills for VET students is the establishment of the Learning Network Arithmetic in VET (*Lerend Netwerk Rekenen in MBO*) in 2023. Scheduled to run until the end of 2025, this project involves 32 educational teams across four regions collaborating to develop arithmetic education tailored to their specific needs. The teams receive guidance from experts, including those from Utrecht University. The initiative aims to enhance the quality of arithmetic education in vocational education and training (VET) institutions. The minister organised field sessions to identify key competences required of VET teachers of basic skills to improve teacher quality. The minister also announced to allocate a yearly sum of EUR 30 million to improve professionalisation of basic skills teachers in VET.

The progress of VET students' basic skills is set to be monitored through the procedures outlined in the Monitoring plan of the VET Working Agenda 2023-2027 and the Internship Pact 2023-27 (*Stagepact 2023-2027*). Specifically, the Monitoring plan includes assessing VET students' proficiency in Dutch and arithmetic by tracking the percentage of graduates who meet the required reference levels. The monitor will be carried out by the Inspectorate of Education. In addition, the plan incorporates monitoring students' feedback on the education they receive in these subjects, as well as employers' evaluations of their vocationally trained employees' proficiency in Dutch and arithmetic.

2024 Implementation

In response to a study highlighting the diverse educational backgrounds of basic skills teachers, the Dutch Minister of Education has proposed imposing additional qualification requirements. This initiative mandates that teachers with backgrounds in subjects other than Dutch language and arithmetic undergo supplementary training to ensure proficiency in these essential areas. The minister is currently preparing legislation to formalise these requirements.

To support students in acquiring fundamental skills, the minister has allocated an additional EUR 10 million to provide free learning materials for Dutch language and arithmetic courses. This investment aims to enhance accessibility and improve educational outcomes in these critical subjects.

2025 Implementation

In a policy letter of 19 May 2025, the Minister of Education reports on progress in strengthening basic skills (language, numeracy, citizenship) in mbo and announces the shift from planning to practical implementation. Many incoming students still lack sufficient basic skills, so the government is allocating EUR 47.2 million for 2025/26 and 2026/27 to support additional guidance, reduce delays, and prevent dropout. The following information is provided in the report:

Regarding language skills: in 2024, an expert group was established to advise the Ministry on new Dutch language requirements for VET students, in line with the objectives of the Working Agenda VET (Werkagenda MBO). The group recommends adapting the requirements so that they better reflect the situations students encounter in their daily lives and in their vocational context. This would allow for differentiation across language levels. The expert group also proposes introducing language requirements per MBO level (MBO 1-4, EQF 1-4), while remaining within the existing 2F-3F range. In addition, it advises replacing national Dutch language exams with institution-based assessments.

The minister supports these recommendations in principle but will proceed only if VET colleges, teachers and relevant stakeholders confirm that the proposed changes are feasible in practice. A feasibility assessment is currently underway.

Regarding numeracy skills: concerns about the numeracy exam, especially for students with dyscalculia, have led to further research and an extension of support for adjusted exams. Institutions must better inform students about available exam accommodations. A national online numeracy platform is also being developed to support students.

Regarding citizenship skills: a new law clarifying citizenship education obligations (safe learning climate, practising democratic values, dialogue, responsibility) is under consultation. Institutions are already preparing by designing new modules.

Regarding teacher quality: many teachers need additional subject knowledge and didactic skills in basic skills. New 30 ECTS training pathways for mbo teachers in Dutch, numeracy and citizenship are being prepared, with planned legal requirements entering into force on 1 August 2027.

On evidence-informed practice: following the final report of an inventory study identifying 90 language-focused interventions in secondary vocational education (MBO), the ministry intends to invest in further research into the effectiveness of these interventions, in order to promote evidence-informed education and strengthen knowledge sharing between VET colleges.

Bodies responsible

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

Target group

Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices

Education professionals

Teachers

Entities providing VET

VET providers (all kinds)

Thematic categories

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Acquiring key competences

Teachers, trainers and school leaders competences

Systematic approaches to and opportunities for initial and continuous professional development of school leaders, teachers and trainers

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

IVET

Further reading

[Policy letter introducing Masterplan Basic Skills](#)

[Amendment of reference levels for arithmetic as a result of the recalibration of arithmetic requirements](#)

[Letter to Parliament on tackling basic skills of VET students](#)

[Monitoring plan of the Joint Agenda 2024-27](#)

[Policy letter on the progress in the approach to basic skills in VET, 4 April 2024](#)

[ReferNet Netherlands; Cedefop \(2023\). Netherlands: how to equip VET students with the adequate basic skills to participate in society successfully. National news on VET](#)

[Letter on temporary measure to provide free learning materials for basic skills](#)

[Second Policy letter on the progress in the approach to basic skills in VET, Education ministry, 19 May 2025](#)

[Cover letter for the research report Inventory of language interventions in VET, Education Ministry, 7 July 2025](#)

Related policy developments

2025 Completed

Promoting literacy, mathematics and digital competences for adults

The Count on Skills (*Tel mee met Taal*) 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

2019 Completed

Improving adult literacy

The Count on language action plan 2016-19 (*Tel Mee met Taal*, EUR 18 million annual budget) introduced a joint action programme of several ministries to improve social and labour market participation, primarily of adults with insufficient literacy skills.

 NETHERLANDS

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

CVET

2022 Completed

Basic maths competences in VET

The 2016 maths agenda, agreed by the education ministry, education providers and social partners, aims to improve maths education in secondary education and in VET.

 NETHERLANDS

Type of development

Practical
measure/Initiative

Subsystem

IVET

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