

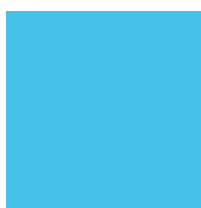
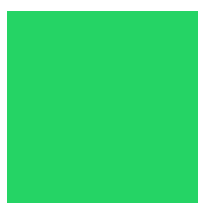
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# IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

Making national VET agile,  
flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality assured

# NETHERLANDS

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# Implementing European priorities in VET

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive,  
inclusive and quality-assured:  
NETHERLANDS

[Thematic perspectives](#) provide national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offer comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

This thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) policies and systems provided in [VET in Europe database](#) and the [Timeline of VET policies in Europe](#). The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

This thematic perspective was prepared based on data/information from 2023.

Thematic perspectives are co-financed by the European Union and ReferNet national partners.

[ReferNet](#) is a network of institutions across Europe representing the 27 Member States, plus Iceland and Norway. The network provides Cedefop with information and analysis on national vocational education and training (VET). ReferNet also disseminates information on European VET and Cedefop's work to stakeholders in the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

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Please cite this publication as:

Bremer, B., Coenen, J., Kans, K., & Wolf, M. (2024). *Implementing European priorities in VET: making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive and quality-assured: Netherlands*. Cedefop Refernet thematic perspectives.

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## CHAPTER 1. Introduction

The Dutch VET system faces several challenges, including decreased learner motivation and declining enrolments, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and demographic changes. At-risk learners struggle with limited access and decreasing proficiency in essential skills such as literacy, numeracy, and digital competences. The labour market's demand for unskilled workers offers unsustainable job opportunities, while persistent shortages in skilled positions remain. Additionally, there are significant issues with VET teacher recruitment, professional development and their involvement in research and innovation networks. Moreover, student satisfaction surveys highlight the need for improved career guidance, and participation in lifelong learning, especially among older adults and those with practical backgrounds, is declining.

To address the challenges VET faces, the Netherlands have been developing gradually several strategic documents in alignment with European priorities set by the [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#). The first version of the Netherlands' National Implementation Plan (NIP), which broadly outlined the intended policy measures, was submitted in June 2022. The [final version of NIP](#) was completed in February 2024 as it was indispensable to incorporate the outcomes from the 2022 discussions between VET stakeholders, which were summarised in the [Working together on talent agenda for VET 2023-27](#) (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science et al., 2023). This VET Working Agenda reflects the priorities set by stakeholders, including students, employers, and both local and national governments, and outlines how they plan to achieve these ambitions in the coming years. The NIP is primarily based on this VET Working Agenda, and, additionally, in the [Roadmap for Lifelong Learning](#) and its follow-up policy letters (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020; 2022; 2023b).

The Thematic perspective on implementing European priorities in VET in the Netherlands is largely based on the documents mentioned above, as they include the concrete measures needed to achieve the Netherlands' ambitions, while also advancing the broader European goals. Three mainline priorities from the Working Agenda were included in the NIP: promoting equity of opportunities; enhancing the connection between education and the labour market; and developing future-proof education with a focus on quality and by stimulating research and innovation in VET. The fourth priority, increasing participation in lifelong learning, is based on the Roadmap for Lifelong Learning.

## CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

### 2.1 Agile and resilient VET, adaptive to labour market needs

The adaptability and resilience of VET remains in focus for the Dutch government. In the NIP, the education ministry envisions VET programmes as pathways leading to promising positions in the labour market and society or to further studies, tailored to the interests and abilities of every VET student, young and old. One of the two documents behind the NIP, the [VET Working Agenda](#), mentions concrete measures that support the connection between VET and the labour market (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science et al., 2023). Since 2023, the

education ministry invests even more in career guidance and orientation programmes. This funding initiative targets recruitment challenges emerging from critical sectors such as housing, care, climate, and energy. It emphasises the significance of technical innovations and digitalization in these areas, aiming to promote and encourage the adoption of new, promising occupations to address these evolving needs. Additionally, as part of the VET Working Agenda, a cross-sectoral agenda on career guidance and orientation, is being developed, facilitated by the centre of expertise on career guidance (*Expertisepunt LOB*).

In the VET Working Agenda, the following actions aimed at improving the connection between education and the labour market are mentioned: students receive more information and better guidance in their study choice; high quality internship or apprenticeship for students; and further training and retraining of workers, jobseekers and vulnerable groups.

The education ministry is committed to enhancing practice-based learning alongside the existing VET system (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023i). In 2023, the [VET Internship Pact 2023-2027 \(Stagepact\)](#) was signed between the education ministry and key stakeholders from both education and business sectors. The pact aims to eradicate discrimination, guarantee ample opportunities for practice-based learning with fair allowance, and arrange good guidance for students. The education ministry has appointed an implementation manager to guide VET schools and training companies in executing this agreement, with a focus on changing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. Steps have already been taken to inform teachers, internship supervisors, practical trainers, and students. An Internship Pact Event that took place in 2023 provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge and best practices. A key goal is to raise awareness of social safety in learning environments, with a focus on combating internship discrimination. As of September 2023, the certification criteria for training companies have been tightened to prevent unsafe situations. Additionally, a toolbox has been developed for vocational schools to support their approach to tackling internship discrimination (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023e).

Moreover, the education ministry states in the VET Working Agenda that as off 2023 it will improve the provision of information about the existing subsidy scheme to stronger support practice-based learning, e.g. by paying attention to the height of the funding that companies can obtain when they offer work-based learning placements as a certified employer (for information on the subsidy scheme see Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023c).

On the topic of basic skills, the education ministry is already working to reduce low literacy levels in the Netherlands. Its efforts are focused on helping adults with low literacy skills better participate in society and pursue further education. (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023e). Currently, low literacy is being tackled using the subsidy scheme *Tel mee met Taal* (Count on Language), which runs until 2024. In addition to this programme, the education ministry tries to reduce low literacy by developing a sustainable regional educational infrastructure that provides training opportunities targeting low literate adults (LLL-Collective for low-skilled and low literate adults). More specifically, two pilot regions have made a start with improving training for low-skilled and low-literate adults. This training is then linked to employment opportunities in the region. The pilots are running in the labour market regions Twente and Zuidoost-Brabant. If the pilots are successful, 18 other labour market regions will start similar projects developing a regional educational infrastructure (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023d).

For VET students, specific policy measures are announced in several policy letters in 2023. These policies are aimed at VET students rather than adults and address not only Dutch language proficiency, but also numeracy (arithmetic) and citizenship skills, all of which are mandatory VET courses in the Netherlands. To this end, the minister announced two lines of action in the relevant 2023 policy letter: a. strengthening the quality of education and examination and b. strengthening the quality of teachers (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023b). In the same year, he also announced the monitoring plan of the VET Working Agenda to track students' proficiency level in Dutch, arithmetic, and citizenship. According to the policy letter regarding the Advisory report Citizenship education in a changing society of 2023, students' opinions on education they receive in Dutch arithmetic and citizenship will be assessed. Policies aimed to professionalise teachers are also planned, but not yet fully specified (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023g).

## **2.2 Flexible VET, providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities**

Easy and flexible route progression within VET is a key priority for the Dutch government. Strengthening the vocational route, which consists of lower secondary pre-vocational education, upper secondary vocational education, and higher professional education, is therefore included in the Working agenda.

One of the measures in the 2023 VET Working agenda involves the continued funding of the Contact and expertise point for specialised craftsmanship to ensure attention for small occupations. The Association of VET colleges and the education ministry plan to stimulate schools in secondary education, VET and higher education to align study programmes, so students who want to continue in a similar programme in another educational sector will experience no barriers in their transfer. As a result of this planned measure, study programmes across different education levels are expected to become better interconnected, fostering activities where students from secondary education, VET, and higher education can interact. This will help pupils and students explore various educational routes and pathways, guiding them toward an education and career that suits them. The initial focus will be on sectors facing the most significant societal challenges. VET schools, together with their regional partners in secondary and higher education, will analyse their study programmes in this regard, with funding provided through a subsidy scheme (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science et al., 2023). This policy is related to the earlier Strong VET programme (Sterk beroepsonderwijs) (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023b).

Increasing lifelong learning (LLL) participation is equally important to the Dutch government (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment & Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2020; 2022; 2023b). The lifelong development policy ([Roadmap for Lifelong Learning](#)) focuses on four interrelated pillars, that consist of several measures and activities (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment & Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023b). Here, we discuss the developments relevant for 2023.

For the first pillar of LLL activities, the education and employment ministries aim to encourage individuals to engage in lifelong learning, to simplify access to information and to expand opportunities for guidance and public financing for learning. More specifically:

The government has aimed to further increase awareness of the possibilities to support lifelong learning (e.g. the existence of the lifelong learning credit) through the Learning overview website. Learning overview (*Leeroverzicht* - [www.leeroverzicht.nl](http://www.leeroverzicht.nl)) is a centralised online platform that houses all information on public and private training programmes and financing options. It has been launched in late 2022. It is constantly being kept up to date.

STAP, the Stimulus for Labour Market Position (*Stimulering van de ArbeidsmarktPositie*), provides individuals with a budget for personal development through education and training. However, it was decided in 2023 that the STAP budget will be discontinued after 2023. The government plans to embed a temporary provision within the SLIM scheme (see below), focusing on crucial sectors. Three possible options are explored for individual learning and development support as an alternative for the discontinued STAP budget: a voucher, a learning account, and a learning right, each evaluated based on specific characteristics, costs, effectiveness, flexibility, and implementation timelines.

The second pillar of LLL activities, the Learning Culture programme (*Programma Leercultuur*) (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023a), supports businesses, especially SMEs, in creating a learning culture by raising awareness and highlighting the value of LLL for organizations. The Incentive Scheme for Learning and Development in SMEs (SLIM) (*Stimuleringsregeling leren en ontwikkelen in mkb-ondernemingen*), is designed to encourage learning and development within small and medium-sized enterprises. In an interim evaluation, researchers concluded that the granted projects are progressing according to plan and their results are being secured. Furthermore, positive effects of SLIM on learning and development are already visible (De Vleeschouwer et al., 2024).

The Learning Culture Programme builds on the SLIM subsidy scheme, which promotes lifelong learning in the business sector, particularly SMEs, through the Lifelong learning catalyst initiative (LLO). The goal of the programme is to raise awareness about the importance of learning and development, and to encourage action by improving coordination, knowledge sharing, and communication through LLO. The programme has four main areas:

- (a) Agenda Setting: Raising awareness about the urgency of LLO through targeted communication tools.
- (b) Inspiration and Motivation: Providing practical tools and sessions to make the concept of a learning culture more tangible.
- (c) Support and Facilitation: Offering accessible tools, like the [QuickScan](#) Learning culture, to assess and utilise support option like the SLIM subsidy.
- (d) Knowledge Sharing and Development: Organizing events and funding projects to spread knowledge on lifelong learning and employability.

The third pillar of LLL-activities focuses on the role of educational institutions in increasing the uptake of LLL. Formal post-secondary education is currently underutilised in LLL, as most training is currently non-formal and primarily delivered by private institutions. The ministries highlight the potential benefits of formal education, especially in terms of providing individuals with valuable credentials to better position themselves in the job market. To address this issue, the government introduces an LLO education agenda. The agenda aims to gradually facilitate the integration of formal education into LLO, 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 LLO;
- (c) removing barriers to the delivery of private LLO 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 were underway in 2023. 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 LLO, with active collaboration between public and private educational providers, employers, and social partners. The agenda is not strictly sequential, as exploratory steps and ongoing actions occur concurrently. While the term 'exploration' suggests no immediate decisions, the government indicates serious consideration of measures such as broadening the legal mandate for LLO and expanding the legal possibilities for offering components of formal education. These efforts emphasise a demand-driven approach and aim to ensure a level playing field for both public and private providers.

Initiated by VET colleges, applied universities, and research universities, the Lifelong Learning Catalyst project runs from 2022 to 2027 and focuses on developing demand-oriented, modular training programmes (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023a). The objectives include mapping future skills through an 'LLO-Radar,' encouraging lifelong learning solutions for transitions, promoting scalable and accessible learning programmes, and stimulating a learning culture. With a total budget of EUR 392 million, the project emphasises regional transition deals to align training demand and supply with each region's economic and social needs. In June 2023 the official national kick-off event the programme took place. Since then, the first application round has started, with the second round starting in April 2024.

### 2.3 Innovative and excellent VET

To make VET future-proof and of top quality, the education ministry has started strengthening the role of VET as a centre for innovation, by firmly embedding research, innovation, and digitalisation within the sector. Efforts are underway to enhance VET's position as a full and equal partner in the research, knowledge, and innovation networks, by bolstering its role in relevant subsidy schemes and research calls. The position of VET teachers in research and innovation activities is also strengthened. Through the annual [Comenius Teaching Fellow grants](#) teachers can apply for funding to bring their ideas for educational innovation to life. Previously, only teachers in higher professional education were eligible to apply, but since 2023, the [grants have also been made available to VET teachers in upper secondary education](#).

Furthermore, the ministry aims to stimulate further development of so-called *practorates* (*practoraten*). *Practorates* are teams for innovation and practice-oriented research in VET consisting of *practors* and teacher-researchers. *Practorates* have a strong practical basis in a

specific sector or educational innovation. An additional 25 million euro on a yearly basis has been made available as off 2023 until 2027 to further develop existing and establish new *practorates*.

## 2.4 Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision

The education ministry seeks to make working in VET attractive and sustainable by reducing workload, improving career prospects of teaching staff, and increasing retainment rates of newly qualified teachers. Furthermore, the education ministry wants to ensure that all employees in the VET sector, especially teaching staff, have sufficient opportunities to develop and professionalise. The NIP does not contain concrete measures how to reach these goals, but the education ministry has been focusing on teacher policy in recent years using, amongst others, the following policies.

According to the 2023 policy letter on teacher policy, the subsidy scheme Teacher Grant (*Lerarenbeurs*) has been extended for five more years, until 2028, to continue promoting the professional development of teachers. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023f).

To address teacher shortages, the education ministry aims to develop a new structure of *Education Regions* that combine teacher training and addressing personnel shortages in education. New Education Regions are being formed, with the aim of having a nationwide network in place by the end of 2024 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023f). The regions will be facilitated by a newly established unit (*Realisatie-eenheid*) under the authority of the education ministry, which will provide advice and assistance (ibid.). In 2023, the formation of the regions is progressing well, with the first precursor regions adopting a learning-oriented approach. The initiative has received substantial interest, with 29 applications submitted, reflecting commitment and awareness among school boards, teacher training institutions, professional groups, and other stakeholders.

In addition, the VET Working Agenda describes the implementation of four programmes to stimulate digitalisation in VET, namely:

- (a) Digitalisation impulse NL (*Digitaliseringsimpuls NL*) or Npuls, which aims to improve VET and higher education and the agility of education and make better use of the opportunities of digitalisation (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023g; DUS-I, 2023). In this eight-year programme (2023 – 2031) all 113 institutions in upper secondary vocational education and higher education (post-secondary and higher education) cooperate to enable system transformation in education.
- (b) Digital education well organised (*Digitaal Onderwijs goed geregeld*) or Edu-V (2022-2029), which aims to develop an agreement system between schools and suppliers of digital learning tools (Edu-V, 2023). In 2023, eight working groups were launched in which representatives of schools and suppliers' draft agreements on topics such as digital learning tools, evaluating study progress and digital examination.
- (c) Cybersecurity VET (*Programma Cyberveiligheid mbo*) (MBO Digitaal, 2022a), which runs from 2023-2028, to improve digital resilience of VET institutions against cyber threats.
- (d) Digital proficiency in VET (*Digitaal Bekwaam mbo*), running from 2023 to 2028, which aims to professionalise teachers' ICT-skills in VET (MBO Digitaal, 2022b).

## 2.5 Inclusive VET promoting equal opportunities

It is the education ministry's ambition that all students in VET, including students who need extra help, should receive optimal opportunities to fully develop their skills and potential. Therefore, they should be able to complete a learning pathway that matches their talents and preferences and leads to sustainable participation in society and the labour market. In line with this ambition, we highlight the following policy developments in 2023.

In 2023, the education ministry committed to several actions to improve inclusive education in VET (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023c) and offer equal opportunities to all VET students, grouped into four key areas: introduction, enrolment, and parental involvement; support for and by teacher teams <sup>(1)</sup>; collaboration between VET, youth and adult services; and guidance on internships and first steps into the labour market.

In 2023, the minister for education announced a new approach to student well-being in VET. This approach focuses on providing schools with tools to work school-wide on student well-being. It focuses on disseminating knowledge and participating in an existing knowledge community, which was originally developed for primary and secondary education. This initiative is aimed at improving well-being by offering improved information for students and better equipping of teaching staff. As a part of this initiative, a national five-year support programme, Student Well-being (*Stijn*), has been established, fostering cooperation of expertise centres, student-initiatives, education institutions, government and care providers in improving student well-being in the VET sector (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023c).

## CHAPTER 3. Involvement of VET stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to NIP

As mentioned in the introduction, the basis of the NIP lies in the VET Working Agenda and in the Roadmap for Lifelong Learning. The VET Working Agenda was drawn up and signed by national VET stakeholders. As such, all signatories have committed to a shared responsibility regarding the priorities within the NIP. The stakeholders include the national organisation of VET students (*JOB MBO* - Youth Organisation in VET), professional association for VET teachers and trainers (*BVMBO*), the VET Council (*MBO Raad*), the Council for private providers of education and training (*NRTO*), both National associations of employers (*VNO-NCW & MKB-Nederland*), the Association of Dutch municipalities (*VNG*), Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (*Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven (SBB)*) and the education ministry (*OCW*). These stakeholders took part in prioritising, formulating, and planning (broad) policy measures and continue their support during the implementation phase by providing advice to the ministry. The education ministry (*OCW*) is responsible for elaborating policy plans in more detail, providing funding, formalising legislation, and monitoring the progress.

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(<sup>1</sup>) In upper secondary vocational education, teachers cooperate in teams where tasks are divided among team members, such as assessment, study- and career guidance, expert teacher, and education design.

Monitoring is outsourced to independent research organisations.

At the level of individual measures, many other stakeholders are involved. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment is an important stakeholder in lifelong learning measures, along with employer and sector organisations and trade unions. Other educational sectors, such as secondary and higher education, are involved, as well as various specialised centres of expertise.

## CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

As the NIP was published only in February 2024, there is not much progress to report on the implementation of the NIP itself. The education ministry recently commissioned independent research organisations to monitor the progress of the VET Working Agenda (January 2024). In the coming years, these monitoring studies, together with the overall monitoring of the Roadmap for Lifelong Learning, will become the main sources of information for tracking the progress of the NIP. Some information is available on the progress of individual measure. The most notable results are highlighted below.

Regarding the link between VET programmes and the labour market, several sources indicate that stakeholders are satisfied with it. In 2023, both students and in-company trainers were satisfied with the internships (SBB, 2023a) and 74% of the employers were satisfied with the occupational skills of graduated VET students (SBB, 2023b).

On the issue of reducing low literacy, a mid-term review of the Count on Language (*Tel mee met Taal*) programme indicates that stakeholders are relatively satisfied with the results so far. They appreciate the regional collaboration between key partners and the knowledge gained regarding factors that contribute to or hinder success (Groot, Buiskool, & Elderenbosch, 2023).

Regarding lifelong learning, progress has been made with many measures now operational. These include the Lifelong Learning Credit, the platform Learning Overview (*Leeroverzicht*), the Learning Culture programme, and the Lifelong Learning Catalyst project (LLO).

As mentioned above, to enhance student well-being as part of education and to promote the dissemination of relevant knowledge, a national five-year support programme called Student Well-being (*Stijn*) was launched in 2023. This initiative is the first of its kind on this scale and has been successful so far due to the effective cooperation among relevant organizations, stakeholders, and education sectors.

## CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

Some measures face implementation challenges, which are highlighted below and discussed further in the conclusions.

On the issue of professional development support for teachers and trainers (not included in the NIP), specifically regarding the subsidy scheme Teacher Grant (*Lerarenbeurs*), some difficulties have arisen but have been successfully addressed. More specifically, due to high demand for the Teacher Grant in the school year (2024-25), the demand exceeded the available budget, meaning not all applicants could be accommodated. To address this, teachers who receive rejection notices in year (2023-24) are given priority in the subsidy round

for the following year (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023f).

Concerning lifelong learning, the STAP budget subsidy scheme <sup>(2)</sup> was somewhat successful in promoting lifelong learning among individuals. However, due to unrelated budgetary reasons, it has been discontinued as of January 2024. An alternative to follow up on the STAP budget is being explored.

On the topic of discrimination in internships, the education ministry proposed an internship matching plan in 2022, to require companies to accept interns presented by VET schools. This proposal was not accepted at that time, because some stakeholders were not convinced of the benefits. Part of the critique was that accepting this plan would place the responsibility for combating discrimination solely on the schools. As a response to this, in 2023, a new roadmap on internship matching was presented as part of the VET Internship Pact (*Stagepact MBO*).

## CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

A strong feature of the Dutch NIP is the involvement of national stakeholders. This involvement contributed to a delay in the preparation of the NIP, but it might be an advantage in the implementation phase. National stakeholders endorse the importance of the priorities set in both the VET Working Agenda and the Roadmap for Lifelong Learning.

Ambitions in the NIP build on earlier established policies. Within these ambitions, we highlight some new focus areas, and we mention potential challenges during implementation.

One of the ambitions of both the measures focusing on the connection between VET and the labour market and lifelong learning measures, is to gear learners towards sectors facing the most significant societal challenges. Currently, the results of these measures are not yet visible, but they are likely to become apparent in the long run. Extra actions contributing to the above-mentioned ambition, are investments in career guidance and providing students with information about promising occupations in the labour market. When it comes to educating for green skills, no concrete measures are mentioned in the NIP.

Where measures to improve literacy levels were, until recently, primarily directed at adults, the NIP places more attention on addressing deteriorating literacy skills among youngsters. However, results from this change of focus cannot be expected in the short term. The education ministry mentions two concrete measures in the Working Agenda: monitoring students' literacy levels and improving the quality of Dutch language teachers. Despite the expected effects of these measures, the VET sector's success also strongly depends on foundational literacy skills provided by primary education and lower secondary education.

Another possible challenge to implementation is the limitation of available budgets, sometimes combined with changing political priorities. Budget changes have been observed recently, for example with the Teacher Grant (*Lerarenbeurs*, not included in the NIP) and the STAP subsidy scheme for lifelong learning.

At the end of 2024, first outcomes of the monitoring studies on the VET Working agenda are expected. These results will offer further insight in the steps being taken to achieve both national and European targets, reflecting a continued commitment to advancing these shared goals.

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<sup>(2)</sup> STAP is the Stimulus for Labor Market Position (*Stimulering van de ArbeidsmarktPositie*) and provides individuals with a budget for personal development through education and training.

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