

Case study The Netherlands

The future of vocational education and training in Europe Volume 2

Delivering IVET: institutional diversification and/or expansion?

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Chapter 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s Secondary VET (middelbaar beroepsonderwijs) in the Netherlands is – according to its current form – non-existent. There is a huge variety of training programmes offered by many small sectorally-oriented schools. What is currently offered by the Regional Training Centers (ROCs) had separate structures: apprenticeship training (leerlingwezen); school-based programmes; education of adults. VET did not as such consist of a single education sector and did not have its own sectoral legal framework or institutional structure (van Schoonhoven, 2016). There were no overarching learning objectives, or specified quality for VET. This all changed in the 1990s.

By 1995 the Dutch VET system was up and running. At the same time two major reforms took place, affecting both the organisation and the content of VET. Firstly, the ‘**Sectorvorming en Vernieuwing Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs**’ (Development of sectors and renewal in VET), enacted in 1990 but already prepared and discussed in Parliament in 1987, reduced the number of VET schools between 1986 and 1991 from 350 to 143 (Bronneman-Helmers, 2001; Honingh, 2008, 9). The preparatory advisory committees for this reform emphasised: increased autonomy of schools; more intensive cooperation with companies; and combining school-based education with in-company training could improve the connection between education and work (Honingh, 2008, 11). The second main reform in the 90s was the introduction of the Vocational Education Act (**Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs: WEB**), announced in 1995 and implemented in 1996 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995). Since this Act, publicly funded secondary vocational education training (Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs (mbo)) is mainly delivered by the Regional Training Centres (ROCs). The core of the WEB Act of 1996 was to bring together vocational education courses in a coherent qualifications structure with levels of education and associated learning pathways. All-in all, it meant a new division of tasks between the VET schools and sectoral organisations (the so-called Knowledge Centres (Kenniscentra) were organisations organised per economic sector involving both social partners and VET providers and that were strongly embedded in the companies, that were responsible for organising and delivering the dual learning pathway). The sectoral organisations, having closer links with companies were after the reform tasked only with supervision of the learning in companies instead of actually organising and providing dual VET together with the companies. The strengthening of VET schools came at the cost of the engagement of the sectoral organisations and with them the social partners (Klarus, 2020, 267). Furthermore, the WEB affected the content and delivery of VET:

1. Firstly, it introduced one **national qualification structure** for all vocational education courses. This was intended to increase labour market support for vocational education and the willingness of businesses to invest in promoting vocational education.
2. Secondly, the Act provided the VET schools a **high level of autonomy** in organising the VET programmes as long as the curricula lead to the, competences with value in the labour market.
3. Thirdly, the Act integrated the **two pathways** within the same system, namely the school based training (Beroepsopleidende Leerweg (bol)) and the work based

training (Beroepsbegeleidende Leerweg (bbl)) which was previously known as the Dutch apprenticeship system (leerlingwezen). Both lead to the same qualification at four separate levels.

4. Fourthly, the Act introduced the **qualification files** (kwalificatiedossiers), describing for each qualification - in the same structure and terminology - the learning outcomes (work processes and core tasks).

While also the period of 2000 to 2020 saw some important reforms, the direction defined in the 90s is still largely in evidence. During this period the sector grew in maturity. It also learned from its failures in establishing ever larger institutions without a clear educational identity resulting in difficulties to maintain quality in VET delivery. A clear example of this was the near-bankruptcy of one of the largest VET schools, Amarantis in 2012 (Chin-A-Fat et al., 2013). During this period, the VET sector more and more developed the vocational identity, and established an own vocational quality (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011). Recent changes concern a further plea for flexibilization of VET delivery, including more modular provision (for instance through elective modules (keuzedelen), and the possibility for VET schools to establish their own applied vocational research positions, similar to the Universities of Applied Sciences ('practoraten') ⁽¹⁾. These research positions aim to stimulate innovation in the VET sector; the economic sector and to realise excellence in vocational education and training while working with the companies in the economic sector.

When comparing the situation between the 1990s and 2020s, the shift identified depends on what part of the 'VET-system' in the 1990s you take as a reference point. When seen from the apprenticeship training (leerlingwezen) perspective, the reforms depict a move away from the labour market and the involvement of companies in organising the apprenticeships with more emphasis on general education and transversal competences. Seen from the perspective of school-based VET however, this is now more labour market oriented such that VET programmes now have an increased workplace orientation. Seen from the school-based system initially the merger with the dual learning pathway decreased the esteem of the programmes. From the perspective of the education of adults, the direction of travel is not so clear. While the idea was that the ROCs could better coordinate this for a region, this did not really happen at first (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen (OCenW), 2001) and has failed to materialise in the years after.

¹ <https://www.practoraten.nl/>

Chapter 2. Blurring of boundaries between general education and IVET at upper secondary level

In the Netherlands, at upper secondary level, there is strict and clear separation between general education and IVET. General education is covered by the 'Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs' (Law on secondary education: (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1963); VET is covered by the 'Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs' (Law on adult education and VET: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995). Also institutionally, general education and VET are strictly separated. Hence, this section does not discuss the blurring lines between general education and IVET, but the developments related to the general education content within IVET.

Content of qualifications: threefold purpose

In the 90s, the school-based VET programmes were more supply-side driven. The VET schools offered broad programmes (mostly in business studies, trade, administration) with limited attention to work practices or to the needs of employers. In apprenticeship training this was obviously different, being very much demand-side driven and determined by the needs of employers. The latter did not focus on general education subjects and general knowledge. The merger between the school-based VET and the dual learning VET in the 1990s envisaged making the programmes both more responsive to labour market needs while, at the same time, trying to develop general knowledge and offer all VET students access to higher education programmes. The WEB introduced the threefold qualification purpose of VET programmes ⁽²⁾: (i) to provide students for the labour market for a specific occupation or occupational field; (ii) to provide the basis for further education; and (iii) to prepare students to fully participate into society (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995). In addition to occupational qualification requirements general competences are also mandatory such as Dutch, mathematics, English (only for mbo level 4), and citizenship. A better integration of general knowledge (not general education) and vocational education and training was one of the objectives of the WEB.

Harmonising how learning outcomes are described

With the formation of the VET sector in the 1990s - with its own legal foundation - the way in which the content of VET programmes were developed was harmonised, at least in theory. In practice however, the harmonisation of VET qualifications required ongoing attention. The starting point was that *how* the learning is facilitated should be independent from *what* student should learn: a distinction between the learning outcomes (developed by and with sectoral stakeholders) and the learning pathway. The WEB introduced the national qualification structure and the qualification files, which introduced the foundation for harmonised descriptions, but throughout the decades that followed major discussions took place on what should be the didactic approach in VET and how the learning outcomes (eindtermen) should

² See for a more in-depth discussion on the threefold qualification purpose of VET: (Smulders, 2012)

be formulated. In this quest different approaches were tested and implemented such as problem-oriented learning and competence-oriented education. These approaches met opposition from critics, VET teachers, and students, though this is often derived from the simultaneously effectuated budget cuts (Klarus, 2020, p. 291). There was, however, more fundamental criticism about how 'competence' was conceptualised within the qualification files. Competence was not conceptualised as the unit of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but as something separate from the two other separate pillars: knowledge and skills. In this context, 'competences' were not seen as the unity with skills and knowledge, but remained rather vague. This vague conceptualisation of competence was difficult to operationalise in VET training and it became even more challenging to assess 'competences' in examinations. Finally, 'competences' did not resonate well with employers as they did not immediately desire them, instead, emphasising knowledge, skills and attitudes, not the competences as narrowly defined aside knowledge and skills. While in the 2010s the competence-oriented education approach was – in name – abandoned, the VET system still includes elements of it in the description of the learning outcomes in qualification files, while better emphasising the unity of knowledge, skills and competences, also in terms of how these as a whole are assessed in examinations and not broken down in separate assessments of skills, knowledge and competences (ECBO, 2014, p. 14).

The qualification file describes the core tasks and work processes (kerntaken en werkprocessen) that individuals starting out in their professional field need to be able to master. Following the standard structure of the Qualification Files, they consist of a basic part (core tasks and work processes) and a 'profile-part', specifying core tasks and work processes specific for the qualifications separately. Each Core Task includes in its description the following aspects (SBB, 2016):

- Complexity
- Responsibility and autonomy
- (subject) knowledge and skills

Each Work Process refers to the following aspects:

- Description
- Result
- Behaviour

Besides that, it contains a 'generic' part, covering:

- Dutch language
- Arithmetic
- Career and Citizenship.

The generic requirements (Dutch language, arithmetic, career and citizenship training ("burgerschap") and English) are set for each of the four VET levels. In this, English is only obligatory for level 4. The requirements for career and citizenship training are substantively revised in 2011 in the Examination regulation of the WEB (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur

en Wetenschap, 2010)³, are not assigned to levels and are not assessed. The schools have the autonomy to make their own choices in how to offer career and citizenship training. While not being further defined, there is a best effort obligation for VET students and a best result obligation for the school. The school's Examination Board must establish whether a student has complied with this best effort obligation. An evaluation in 2016 concluded that while all schools engage in citizenship training it does not match societal expectations, it insufficiently effective, and that the outcomes of the training are difficult to measure. Also, schools face difficulties translating the requirements to an educational offer and that teachers require further professionalisation in offering citizenship training (KBA Nijmegen-ResearchNed, 2016). This gave rise to a citizenship-agenda, developed by the Ministry and the VET schools, aimed at improving the quality of citizenship education (MBO Raad & Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2017).

The occupation-specific requirements have to be expressed in an occupation's core activities and corresponding sets of underpinning knowledge, skills/competences and standards for professional behaviour (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016b). Detailed instructions and models are developed for drafting the qualification files, but these do not prescribe how learning outcomes should be described in detail. This remains up to the economic sectors together with the VET schools. The table below provides an illustration how instructions make suggestions how knowledge and skills can be described at the different levels.

Table 1: Overview of the types of knowledge and skills by VET level ‘the novice practitioner owns....’

	Level	Depth	Content
Knowledge	1	elementary knowledge	Elementary facts and ideas
	2	+ basic knowledge	+ Facts, ideas, processes, materials, tools, concepts
	3	+ Knowledge	+ Core concepts, elementary theories, methods, processes
	4	+ Broad and specialised knowledge	+ Abstract concepts, theories
Skills	1	Replicate knowledge	Elementary recognisable occupational tasks
	2	+ Apply knowledge	+ Use of standard procedures

³ Het kwalificatie-onderdeel loopbaan en burgerschap bereidt deelnemers voor op het vormgeven van hun eigen loopbaan en op participatie in de maatschappij. In dat kader is het van belang dat deelnemers kritische denkvaardigheden ontwikkelen. Onder kritische denkvaardigheden wordt verstaan: informatie (-bronnen) op waarde weten te schatten; daarbij het onderscheid kunnen maken tussen argumenten, beweringen, feiten en aannames; het perspectief van anderen kunnen innemen; kunnen nadenken over hoe eigen opvattingen, beslissingen en handelingen tot stand komen.

3	+ Signalling constraints in knowledge	+ Tasks requiring tactical and strategical insights + Combining standard procedures
4	+ Evaluate and integrate knowledge	+ Developing strategies + Analysing and implementing of fairly complex tasks

Source: (SBB, 2016, pp. 9–10)

There is a strict renewal process for qualifications: they have to be renewed every five years.

Number of qualifications: decreasing numbers; more to choose?

Over the years, the number of qualifications decreased. This was a deliberate choice around 2010-2015 implemented in the revision of the qualification system (Consortium 2B MBO et al., 2018; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011, 2015a). The following figure provides an overview of the qualifications in 2012 and 2021 and shows that indeed the number of qualifications decreased over time between 2012 and 2021.

Table 2: Qualifications and qualification files in 2012 and 2021 by sector; students per sector.

English	Dutch	2012		2021		2020	Students per qualification
		Qualification files	Qualifications	Qualification files	Qualifications		
Building and infrastructure	1. Bouw en infra 79000	19	63	17	56	14,814	265
Finishing, wood and maintenance	2. Afbouw, hout en onderhoud 79010	24	72	17	45	13	0
Technology and process industry	3. Techniek en procesindustrie 79020	21	90	22	83	41,535	500
Craft, laboratory and health engineering	4. Ambacht, laboratorium en gezondheidstechniek 79030	19	55	15	31	8,054	260
Media and Design	5. Media en vormgeving 79040	12	55	10	24	2,719	113
Information and communication technology	6. Informatie en communicatietechnologie 79050	4	9	3	4	23,838	5,960
Mobility and vehicles	7. Mobiliteit en voertuigen 79060	19	41	9	22	16,299	741
Transport, shipping and logistics	8. Transport, scheepvaart en logistiek 79070	25	46	17	38	18,484	486
Trade and entrepreneurship	9. Handel en ondernemerschap 79080	16	34	9	16	27,198	1,700
Economy and administration	10. Economie en administratie 79090	11	28	8	22	52,310	2,378
Safety and sports	11. Veiligheid en sport 79100	5	15	4	13	13,455	1,035
Make-up and care	12. Uiterlijke verzorging 79110	3	8	4	10	13,224	1,322
Catering and bakery	13. Horeca en bakkerij 79120	8	26	8	21	24,008	1,143
Tourism and recreation	14. Toerisme en recreatie 79130	4	12	1	4	7,731	1,933
Care and welfare	15. Zorg en welzijn 79140	15	22	12	24	148,827	6,201
Food, nature and living environment	16. Voedsel, natuur en leefomgeving 79160 79150	42	99	16	51	27,301	535
Entry qualifications (level 1)	Entree kwalificaties (niveau 1)			1	9	14,966	1,663
<i>crossover</i>					134	5,283	39
Total numbers (not crossover)		247	675	173	473	460,059	

Source: Crebo lists for 2012 and 2021 (SBB, 2021) and DUO data on students per sector (DUO, 2020), calculations author.

The table shows a number of interesting aspects of the Dutch system. Firstly there is a decrease of the number of qualifications and qualification files, This decrease, however, is more substantial in specific smaller sectors than larger sectors. For instance the number of qualifications in specific specialisations (finishing, wood and maintenance decreased from 72 to 45. Also in trade and entrepreneurship, qualifications went from 34 to 16, and in tourism the number decreased from 12 to 4. The larger sectors in terms of student numbers however, such as Care and Welfare, Business Studies and Administration, and Technology and Process

Industries - together responsible for half of the VET students - only to a limited extent decreased the number of qualifications. The decrease of qualifications is a deliberative effort to rationalise the VET offer and to bring qualifications that are similar together, offering VET students a broader basis (covering more and different orientations towards jobs; making VET students more flexible). It is less a result of qualifications not being selected by students any longer making them obsolete. As a result, the reduction of qualifications led to qualifications becoming broader and more generic, while at the same time still offering the full set of occupational orientations.

Adding to the conclusion that the decreasing numbers do not suggest a broadening and generalising of the content of qualifications, in recent year, further efforts are made to make qualifications more tailored and responding to specific regional and emerging needs. This is facilitated by allowing students to select **elective modules** (keuzedelen) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011), which are small unitised qualification files that are not prescribed by the qualification but can be selected freely by the student. These optional parts allow students to broaden or deepen skills to strengthen students' sectoral labour market positions within a region, and / or enable students to enter higher vocational education. Within the optional parts there is a clear link with 21st century skills such as innovative thinking, learning a language (besides compulsory languages: Dutch for all, and English for level 4 students), and entrepreneurship. Students can choose from different optional parts to complement their complete programme. In 2021 there are more than thousand elective modules available ⁽⁴⁾. Furthermore, VET institutions are allowed to develop and deliver **cross-over qualifications** within the context of the experiment 'cross-over qualifications' (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016a).

Since 2017, VET schools can respond to labour market developments by offering cross-over qualifications (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016a, p.). VET schools, supported by evidence on the need for a specific cross-over qualification, can submit an application at SBB to offer a cross-over qualification. To strengthen the cooperation between regional education programmes and business life, schools can offer cross over qualifications. These cross-over qualifications combine existing qualifications from two or more different sectors together. This is a pilot that started August 2017 and runs until July 2025 and which is continuously monitored (Consortium 2B MBO, 2000) Currently, there are 135 crossover qualifications.

Autonomy of VET institutions

The previous sections discussed the overarching developments in how qualifications are described in the qualification dossiers. As indicated this is a joint responsibility of the VET schools and employers, brought together with SBB. Generally speaking, the 'what' of VET qualifications is agreed upon at national level; the 'how' of VET provision is decided by the VET schools; this within the formal quality requirements as defined by the Inspectorate (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021). These quality requirements focus on institutional and

⁽⁴⁾ <https://kwalificaties.s-bb.nl/?ResultaatType=Keuzedeel&Fuzzy=False&Schooljaar=2021>

organisational quality and not on the content of the VET provision. VET schools have the autonomy and responsibility to develop learning plans; pedagogical approaches and arrangements with employers to organise the work-based learning components. Given the autonomy of VET providers in *how* VET is provided, it is challenging to provide an overarching assessment on the balance between general subjects and vocational subjects; even at the level of individual VET programmes. In some sectors specific arrangements are made in terms of learning in school-based and work-based learning environments. For instance, in the health care sector, VET schools have long-term relationships with hospitals, with a lot of students each year to do internships and apprenticeships in the hospital. Many VET schools therefore installed more hybrid learning environments, where the school-based part is delivered within the hospital as well.

To conclude on the blurring of boundaries between general education and IVET

Based on the case study, it can be concluded that the development pathway for VET in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2020 is to arrive from a separate system (work-based VET pathway and school-based VET pathway) to a unified system in which a work-based and a school-based pathway lead to the same qualifications supporting both labour market entry and further learning. In this, the main operational level is the VET school: deciding on the *how* of VET education delivery. In this process, still employers and employer representatives play an important role in deciding on the content of qualifications and the delivery of the work-based training. When compared to the situation before 1995, the involvement of employers has decreased, especially in terms of them holding autonomy over a part of the VET provision (apprenticeship training (leerlingwezen)). On the other hand, their involvement increased however in some sectors that were in the past served through the school-based VET system (business studies and administration)(S. D. Broek, forthcoming).

Drawing conclusions on the direction of travel concerning the content of VET qualifications over the years is difficult. One could argue that the VET Act imposed more general education topics on the dual learning pathway, but on the other hand, the WEB also 'vocationally' the VET programmes offered in the school-based VET system. In addition, one could say that more emphasis is placed on language, numeracy and digital skills by imposing centralised exams. On the other hand, the introduction of the elective parts allowed VET programmes to respond more directly to emerging needs and trends in the labour market. All in all, the direction of travel is imposed by the VET act insisting on the three-fold function of VET qualifications: (i) to provide students for the labour market for a specific occupation or occupational field; (ii) to provide the basis for further education; and (iii) to prepare students to fully participate into society (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995). The VET sector, throughout 25 years is trying to strike the right balance in response to this three-fold purpose.

Chapter 3. Relationship of IVET at upper secondary levels with that at higher levels

The IVET system is strictly confined to the four VET levels (1-4) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995); references to EQF levels 1-4. The Universities of Applied Science (UAS; Hogescholen) offer EQF level 5 (and higher) qualifications that have a vocational or professional component. The associate degree was piloted in 2006 and formally became part of the higher education system in 2013. The objective behind their introduction was to fill the gap between qualification levels (VET 4 and professional bachelor); but even more, to smoothen the transition from VET to higher education by offering a two-year programme instead of a four-year bachelor programme. With the two-year Associate Degree, the bachelor can be obtained within an additional two years of study.

The associate degree is a two-year (120 ECTS) programme at a University of applied science, previously being part of a hbo bachelor programme (from 1 January 2018 it became a self-standing qualification) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016c). The level is between senior secondary vocational education on qualification level 4 (NLQF/EQF level 4) and hbo bachelor. Associate degree programmes are primarily oriented to students with a diploma of senior secondary vocational education at qualification level 4 or to people who have some years of working experience. After finishing the programme, they are eligible to enter the bachelor programme the associate degree is linked to. To enter an associate degree programme, a havo (upper secondary education) diploma or a senior secondary vocational education diploma at qualification level 4 is required. There are in 2021 316 associate degree programmes offered by state-funded higher education institutions (full-time, part-time and dual programmes); this increased from 21 in 2007 to 116 in 2008 and 203 in 2018 (DUO, 2021b). The student numbers increased from 6,786 in 2016 to 17,528 in 2020 (DUO, 2021a). Within the last decade the Associate Degree is more and more embedded within the education system: more and more (VET) students find it an attractive option for continuing their studies; more and more UAS offer Associate Degrees (after quite some initial hesitation, as it was believed to decrease their prestige offering a lower qualification than they would normally do).

Increasingly, VET institutions together with UAS offer associate degree programmes. While there is a continuous discussion whether associate degrees should actually be offered by VET institutions to make them better linked to the VET programmes and the labour market. Opponents of this idea see more value in increasing the cooperation between institutions in which the UAS remain responsible; but VET schools provide the training. In this cooperation model the strict separations in legal frameworks on VET and HE are maintained (ScienceGuide, 2021).

In 2009 almost half of the VET students continued their studies in higher education (both Associate Degree and Bachelor). In 2015 this decreased significantly to 40% (ResearchNed, 2020a). This while the overall student numbers in Higher Education increased, especially in the Universities of Applied Sciences (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2021). The main reason as concluded in the 2020 study is the introduction of a loan-system for students in higher education. This made continuation of studies for VET students less attractive. There is no

evidence that this negatively affects the overall attractiveness of VET compared to general education.

To conclude on the relationship of IVET at upper secondary levels with that at higher levels, it can be mentioned that in the last decade steps are taken to reduce the barriers for VET students to continue further learning in higher education (through the associate degree); while this had results, still there are barriers, especially financial ones, as imposed through the 2015 introduced higher education loan-system. This is currently a politically heavily debated topic.

Chapter 4. The changing relationship between IVET and CVET

Adult education and basic skills training (state funded)

The Vocational Education Act (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs: WEB) deliberately addresses adult education in the same context of VET. It provided one legal framework for all secondary level VET, but also included second chance education (secondary education: voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs: vavo). According to article 7.3.1 of the Adult and Vocational Education Act, adult education covers the following types: 1) Second chance education (secondary education: voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs: vavo)); 2) Dutch as a second language (NT2), and; 3) Dutch language and numeracy. The provision that helps adults improve their basic skills relates usually to support in reading and writing. Also, the education funded through the WEB has a deliberate objective to increase learning levels leading to some form of formal qualification.

Initially, the WEB ensured that vavo and basic skills training was offered by the Regional Training Centres (Regionale Opleidings Centra: ROC). In 2015, the WEB was changed. From that moment onwards, municipalities being previously obliged to purchase the adult education offer from the VET institutions, had more liberty in offering different types of adult education. Gradually, the direct purchase of municipalities at VET institutions decreased, creating a competitive market for adult education. All in all, the IVET institutions (ROCs) over time lost their core focus on the education of adults (Regioplan, 2017). This provision is organised at municipality level and delivered a range of organisations. These include libraries, reading and writing foundations, ROCs, not-for-profit organisations and private providers.

In the last decade, the issue of basic skills, and particularly of literacy has been receiving additional attention. In the context of the “Joining forces for a higher skill level in the Netherlands: follow-up approach to low-literacy, 2020–2024” (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2019), the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has requested technical assistance to the European Commission’s Structural Reform Support Service and OECD to help them implement this new approach to low literacy (OECD, 2019). The ROCs, depending on their region, play a role in this.

In terms of numbers, the participation in second chance education (secondary education: voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs: vavo), gradually grew from less than 12 thousand in 2006/07 to more than 16.5 thousand in 2017/18. After this peak it slightly decreased to less than 16 thousand in 2019/20 (CBS, 2020a). The information concerning participation in basic skills training funded through the WEB and offered by VET schools is not centrally gathered. There are initiatives to improve the monitoring of basic skills training in the Netherlands, such as the European Commission DG Reform programme on mapping quality approaches and monitoring systems in the Netherlands contributing to improving the quality and monitoring of basic skills education for adults in the Netherlands. This project is carried by the OECD in cooperation with the municipalities (OECD, 2019).

Enrolment of adults in regular IVET

Other types of state-regulated adult education (often referred to as post-initial education), offered by VET institutions often have no specific reference to adults: adults can participate in regular IVET courses (bol and bbl). The figure below provides an overview of the student numbers in 2005/06 (first year data is available at CBS) and 2019/20 by age groups. From this overview it becomes clear that in 15 years there is not a lot of change in the coverage of age groups. The adult population in regular IVET courses remains fairly constant.

Table 3: Student numbers in regular IVET courses by age group

	2005/2006		2019/2020	
	N	%	n	%
25 and under	417,999	86	439,266	87
25+	65,813	14	64,588	13
35+	34,967	7	25,767	5
Total	483,812	100	503,854	100

Source: CBS (CBS, 2020a)

Besides state-funded formal VET, private providers can offer non-state funded formal VET qualifications (exactly the same in terms of learning outcomes as those provided by IVET institutions). These private providers target adult learners. In total, more than 30 thousand adults are enrolled in privately provided courses; almost half in the health care sector (NRTO, 2019a).

VET schools involvement in non-state funded adult learning

The plea for more flexibility in VET and more room for VET schools to provide training to adults emerged in the 2000s and resulted a 'third learning pathway' (derde leerweg), besides the bol (school-based pathway) and bbl (work-based pathway) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011). The third learning pathway allows VET institutions to offer the formal VET qualifications without having to comply with the hourly standards for the school-based part and the work-based part respectively, tailoring the VET programmes better to adult learners. It however remained challenging for VET institutions to compete in the private market. One challenge that remained was that it was still difficult to see what room VET schools had in navigating on the private market. The WEB did not make as such a challenge for VET schools (ROCs) to engage in non-state funded adult learning provision, but it made it easier for non-state funded institutions to offer formal VET qualifications. While VET schools were occupied with organising the initial VET and engaging in mergers, private providers more or less took over the adult learning market. The learning of adults is hence primarily seen as something that is not a public concern; but something that is organised by the private market and funded through individual and employer contributions. However, also state-funded schools were operating on this market, offering training courses to individuals and companies. This led to tensions concerning whether one could compete with public funding in a private market

causing problems with a level playing field. The involvement of state-funded institutions in private markets led to heated debates and requests for more ministerial guidance as early as 2004 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2004). This, together with a lack of a systematic vision for the learning of adults, resulted in a 'CVET-system' that by 2008 was primarily provided by private providers (Onderwijsraad, 2009), and this did not substantially change over the last decade (NRTO, 2019b). In 2020, a guide was developed for VET institutions (both state funded and non-state funded) to offer a more flexible VET provision (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020b).

In an effort to formulate an overarching national policy on adult learning, the Dutch government introduced in 2018 an inter-ministerial programme for lifelong development (leven lang ontwikkelen: LLO) (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, 2018; Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2020). Since the launch of this strategy, there has been a continuous flow of initiatives with changes to legislation and policy reforms. The programme emphasises the role of individual learners (stimulates them to take control), the employers (establishes learning cultures); improves equity and access (ensures the quality of basic skills training; allows more flexibility in VET and HE; fosters engagement with non-traditional learners); bases the offer on individual, societal and labour market needs; improves quality through improving quality assurance mechanisms; and last but not least improves the coordination, joint policy making and knowledge base through studies and improved monitoring frameworks (to measure impacts on participation, skills developed and the societal/labour market outcomes of learning).

Specifically for IVET providers in recent years there are initiatives taken to make IVET more attractive for adult learners and to provide the VET institutions (ROCs) more opportunities to provide an offer to adult learners and be a skills development partner to employers within their region. This relates to allowing more flexibility, for instance offering certificates of units of full VET qualifications, based on the elective modules (keuzedelen) besides only full VET qualifications (ResearchNed, 2020b); intensifying regional approaches and cooperation between VET providers and regional stakeholders such as companies; PES and municipalities (see for instance (Kennispunt MBO leven lang ontwikkelen, 2020).

Another notable policy development that have taken place within the framework of lifelong development concerns the further development of the frameworks for the STAP (Incentive Labour market Position) allowance scheme. This scheme is a kind of individual learning account, or voucher that can be used by individuals to pay for training. With this (personal) development budget, which is expected to be implemented by (January) 2022, adult learners can participate in a wide variety of training activities, also offered by VET institutions. This scheme forms part of a larger initiative to empower adults to gain control over their own learning and development, and aims to stimulate adult learning.

To conclude on the changing relationship between IVET and CVET

While a substantial number of 25+ adults are enrolled in formal VET programmes at IVET institutions (vavo and regular VET programmes), the vast majority of adult learning takes place

in private providers, both offering formal VET qualifications and shorter courses. This is a result of how in the Netherlands formal VET is regulated by the WEB while there is no systematic legal framework for adult learning. With the introduction of the WEB, VET institutions (ROCs) were only able to engage in formal VET and basic skills programmes. The role of VET schools over the years further decreased with the removal of the basic skills training provision around 2015. Over recent years, however, there is acknowledgement that in an effective adult learning system, there is also a role for publicly-funded VET schools, offering short-courses (as part of a full qualification) to upskill and re-qualify workers. This acknowledgement resulted in a more systematic approach to adult learning; better regulatory frameworks for VET schools to make their offer to adults more attractive and have VET schools play the regional skills development role envisaged for them already by the WEB. In recent years discussions are taking place within the VET sector and within government about making VET schools better able to serve adult learners.

Chapter 5. Changing institutional arrangements

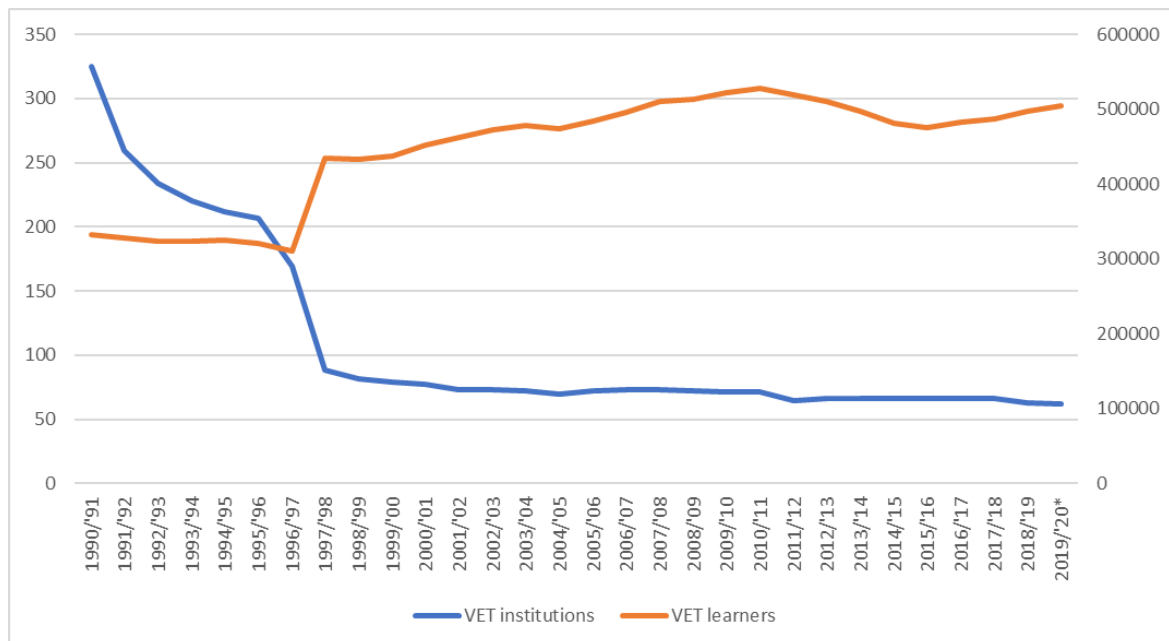
Mixing general and VET schools

In the Netherlands, before the WEB all secondary education was governed by the 1963 'Mammoth Law' (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1963; van Lutsenberg Maas, 1964) which entered into force in 1968. The Law did not have the positive results expected, especially for VET, as lower VET and higher VET did not fit well together decreasing the transitions from the lower to the higher VET. This resulted in taking VET out of the Mammoth Law and provide its self-standing legal framework (the WEB). This also resulted in the **impossibility of having schools offering both general education and VET at upper-secondary education level**. Hence, in the Netherlands there are no 'hybrid' schools. Examples such as Technasia (Technasium, n.d.), which are general education schools that, besides regular programmes, also have a programme that focuses more of beta subjects, may sound like mixing VET and general education, but this is hardly the case as it is not vocationally-oriented, but oriented to science and engineering. Only in the agriculture sector can one find schools covering both lower-secondary VET, general education, and upper-secondary VET, for instance Helicon (Helicon, n.d.). There is currently a legal proposal in public consultation (internetconsultatie) to allow VET and general education to better cooperate in so-called 'verticale scholengemeenschappen' (vertical groups of schools) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2021). This would not so much focus on bringing together upper secondary general education and upper secondary VET, but to offer more continuously learning pathways from lower secondary VET to upper secondary VET within specific sectors. The clearest examples are the agricultural schools for which combining lower secondary and upper secondary VET would be preferable.

VET school and students

As already indicated, in the 1990s, major changes took place in the VET sector, enforced by the 'Sectorvorming en Vernieuwing Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs' (Development of sectors and renewal in VET); and the introduction of the Vocational Education Act (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs: WEB). These processes put in motion a continuous consolidation and merging of VET schools. The figure below provides an overview of the number of VET schools and the total number of students between 1990 and 2020. The sudden increase of students in 1996 related to the inclusion of apprenticeships (leerlingwezen) in the VET system. The figure shows that in less than ten years, the number of schools decreased from more than 300 to less than 100. While the pace of consolidation decreased, still mergers take place and will take place in the future.

Figure 1: VET schools and students between 1990 and 2020



Source: CBS (CBS, 2020b)

In terms of institutional arrangements and governance of the VET system, for the VET schools not much changed concerning the legal frameworks after the developments in the 90s as discussed before. The overall distribution of responsibilities between government and VET schools was operationalised in the VET Act and did not change over time. As indicated in the interviews, the change happened more within the VET schools themselves: the schools are in continuous flux, merge, expand, focus and develop. After two decades of flux, it becomes visible that the VET schools outgrew their initial stages of development and entered maturity. They developed the institutional identity and institutional capacity to play a major role in regional skills development, working closely together with companies and governments.⁵

One development that changed the institutional framework related to VET was the establishment of the cooperation organisation for vocational education, training and the labour market (Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven: SBB) is a tri-partite organisation, in which VET schools cooperate with labour market stakeholders. They are responsible for assuring the quality of working-learning places and maintaining the qualification files. In the past there used to be 17 sectoral knowledge centres, but with the 2015 amendment to the VET Act (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2015b) all legal responsibilities, such as the accrediting and coaching work placement companies and maintaining the qualification framework for secondary vocational education, shifted from the 17 sectoral knowledge centres to SBB.

⁵ A similar movement is noticeable for the Universities of Applied Science as is described in (S. Broek, 2018).

Examination and quality assurance

The basic idea historically underlying the Dutch VET system and that is also included in the WEB is that centrally the *what* of VET is defined; but that the *how* is the responsibility and autonomy of VET schools. In defining the *what* there are two key institutions. The SBB is facilitating the process of developing qualification files and drafts the learning outcomes. The second important institutional pillar defined the *what* in VET is the inspectie van het onderwijs (inspectorate of Education)⁶ responsible for the inspection and review of schools and educational institutions and assesses the assessment procedures as well (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020).

How VET is delivered and how progress is assessed is the responsibility of the school. They need to ensure that the assessments complies with the requirements as set by the government and that all processes are quality assured. This responsibility of the schools is introduced with the WEB, but it required continuous developments to shape the examination, especially of the work-practice. Throughout the 25 year period of the WEB, examination remained a problematic issue. As early as 2001, an inspection report stated “the quality of examination is concerning for many years. The VET programmes reviewed in recent years on average in half of the cases, the examination did not meet the requirements. The exercises were significantly lower than the stated learning outcomes and the examinations did not cover the full content.” (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2001, p. 26; IVA, 2011, p. 11). Around the 2010s the quality of examination was still considered below expectations because the examination was not standardised (Onderwijsraad, 2010). The examination remained a key topic ever since, mostly focusing on solving practical challenges and clarifying how the inspection would review the schools on this topic (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016). Currently, the VET institutes design their assessment in line with the learning outcomes are described in the qualification file. They can also ask private organisations to design assessments (MBO Raad, 2020a). This continuous struggle with the examination should be seen in the perspective of the VET schools growing into their autonomy and responsibility. While they were given this responsibility from the start of the WEB, still they have to develop the maturity level to take the autonomy and responsibility and - at times – challenge the decisions of the inspection given that they have good reasons to conduct the examination different from the prescribed format. An interesting field of study in this regard is to what extend schools can adjust the examination for students with special needs: how to interpret the stated learning outcomes to allow students with special needs to comply with them while this at first sight does not seem obvious (for instance loading a lorry for someone in a wheelchair) (MBO Raad et al., 2018; Stoutjesdijk & Broek, 2016)

To improve the transition from VET to higher education, for some subjects, Dutch language and basic maths and English (only mbo level 4), was taken away from the schools and examined centrally. This introduction of obligatory central examinations was carried out in phases; starting with a pilot in 2014-2015; fully implementing central examinations on these general subjects by 2017-2018 (College voor toetsen en Examens, 2014).

⁶ <https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>

Another topic where the *what*, determined by the Inspection, and the *how*, defined by the schools are the hourly standards for the school-based pathway and the work-based pathway, and then more specifically the annual 700 hours of supervised training (MBO Raad, 2020b). The Inspection sees it as necessary for assuring sufficient quality to maintain these hourly standards, but VET institutions can argue that less hours are needed for obtaining the same quality (MBO Raad, 2014).

To conclude on the changing institutional arrangements

Based on the case study, it can be concluded that institutionally, the VET sector has seen huge changes. These mostly occurred in the late 1990s, but they continued in the 2000s and 2010s as well with the merging of the knowledge centres into SBB. Furthermore, the main institutional changes take place under the surface, within the VET institutions: they are more and more growing into maturity and are more and more fully able to take up the assigned responsibility.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: Harmonisation, diversification, pluralisation, academic/vocational drift

All in all, when reviewing the developments of the Dutch VET system from 1995 to 2020, the overarching development that is noticeable and that underlies all different changes and smaller-scale changes is that we see a sector that is growing in maturity. Similar to the life of a child, with the WEB, the VET sector entered into adolescence: it broke away from the overarching secondary education legal framework (Mammoth Law); it was given autonomy and responsibility, but was not exactly sure what to do with this. This led in the first two decades after the WEB to all kind of issues and even scandals, such as the demerger of the Amarantis group after financial challenges, fraud and stories concerning self-enrichment of the governing board. Within this period, a lot of mechanisms and processes had to be re-invented and redeveloped, such as how to develop the qualification files; how to write learning outcomes; how to assure the quality of provision.

Around 2010, with the policy focus on craftsmanship (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011), a new step towards maturity was taken. Instead of responding to imminent challenges in the sector, the VET sector became more self-reflective; better determining its own added values; own identify; own type of research (Praktoraten). This period is currently coming to an end with the sector and the VET institutions that are well capable to taking up the autonomy and responsibility given to them in the WEB, not only to narrowly fulfil their core tasks, but to expand their role in areas where the VET providers have been weaker historically.

In this new period, according to future-oriented exploration developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, VET institutions (ROCs) will reform in regional centres for innovation and VET (regionale centra voor innovatie en beroepsonderwijs: CIB) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020a). These centres combine lower-secondary VET, upper-secondary VET, universities of applied sciences, and bring them together with local employers, governments and health care institutions ensuring an integral responsibility for the economical and the social function of VET. In this approach, hybrid learning environments and hybrid teachers play an important role in developing 'agile craftsmanship' (wendbaar vakmanschap) (Coenders & Mazereeuw, 2020) and the learning of adults, lifelong development, is a key pillar through offering flexible, modular education and training.

Only a self-conscious VET sector, which has proving its value and own identify can force new alliances with general education; higher education; other stakeholders to truly become a key player in regional ecosystems for skills development, not only for young people, but for adults as well, and respond to the emerging skills challenges in the future.

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