

Case study the Netherlands

The future of vocational education and training in Europe Volume 4

Delivering lifelong learning: the changing relationship between IVET and CVET

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Case study content

This case study looks at a broad set of policy initiatives that aim to foster lifelong development in the Netherlands and to establish a learning culture. After providing an introduction to the topic of IVET and the learning of adults in the Netherlands (Part1), the case study will look at how these initiatives impacted the VET sector (Part 2); and how VET programmes in two sectors (retail and mechatronics) changed under influence of the policy initiatives. In Part 4 a broad conclusion is provided together with some reflections on future orientations.

Part 1: Introduction IVET and the learning of adults

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. More details about these programmes are summarised in the Eurydice report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021, pp. 194–195) (see table in annex).

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. The adult learning provision covered by the WEB is hence more oriented to second change and basic skills than up-, and reskilling in an employment context.

Adults are allowed to enrol in VET programmes offered by the VET providers (Regional Training Centres (Regionale Opleidings Centra: ROC)). The table below provides an overview of the student numbers in 2005/06 (first year data is available at CBS) and 2019/20 by age groups. The data suggests that the number of adults in VET is decreasing in recent years after a slight increase. Especially the number 35+ students decreased in 15 years from 35 thousand to 26 thousand.

Table 1: Student numbers in regular IVET courses by age group

	2005/2006		2019/2020	
	N	% of total	n	% of total
15-19 (subgroup of 25 and under)	300,388	62	312,604	62
20-24 (subgroup of 25 and under)	117,590	24	126,087	25
25 and under	417,999	86	439,266	87
25+	65,813	14	64,588	13
35+ (subgroup of 25+)	34,967	7	25,767	5
Total	483,812	100	503,854	100

Source: CBS (CBS, 2020)

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). The fees are privately paid, usually by households and employers. The Public Employment Services do not play a role.

In total, in 2020 1.7 million adults (25-65 year olds) participated in lifelong learning (covering all kinds of learning) (CBS, 2021). Of these, in total nearly 700 thousand adults are enrolled in formal programmes, a large share of learners does this in general education or higher education programmes, often non state-supported programmes. Furthermore, of these, around 150,000 learn in public formal IVET and private formal IVET provision, making the formal VET contribution quite limited. Of those enrolled in non-formal programmes (more than a million), around one-third is enrolled in a course of a duration of less than a week (CBS, 2021). As can be seen, the learning of adults, takes place mostly outside formal programmes and in shorter courses, usually facilitated by employers or self-initiated by adults. This is illustrated by descriptions on the two exemplary sectors below.

While the IVET system is funded by the government based on a lump sum approach calculated on the basis of the number of students and diploma that are eligible to public funding (students in bol (school-based pathway) and bbl (work-based pathway)). Students outside bol and bbl are not publicly funded and VET institutions can decide themselves on the fees. Besides household contributions, an important role is played by the sector funds in the funding of sectorally oriented lifelong development, also for participation in VET programmes.

Before discussing the learning of adults in the two sectors, first a contextualisation is provided of the sectors.

Metals and metalelectro sector (industrial manufacturing): mechatronics engineer

The SBB trend rapport on the sector (SBB, 2020b) indicates that over the years, the influx of students in the VET programmes decreases and that the sector has difficulties to find technically educated employees. Currently almost half of the employees is educated at a upper secondary education level (up to EQF level 4), while technological developments (3d printing, robotisation, digital production), more and more call for higher educated personnel. Also, a broader application of skills in different context is valued by companies, calling for more transversal skills (such as flexibility and autonomy, but also client orientation and communication skills), and for lifelong development. Many companies are – also to improve the competitiveness – investing in establishing learning cultures (Panteia, 2020; SBB, 2020b).

In the sector, VET institutions play a large role in getting young people in, but VET institutions play a limited role in the further training of employees. This despite close contacts between the VET institutions and the companies in organising the work-based learning component in formal initial VET programmes. Key organisations in the organisation and facilitation of adult learning are the sectors foundations (Sectorfondsen), representing both

employees and employers (social partners), making arrangements concerning education and training (not providing training themselves) and collective labour agreements. In the metals sector this is OOM ⁽¹⁾, in the metalelectro, this is A+O Metalektro ⁽²⁾. They offers funding arrangements (e.g. vouchers) to develop specific technical skills as well as more transversal (digital) skills. For instance, A+O Metalektro offers a learning platform – oZone ⁽³⁾ – offering more than 150 elearning courses. The funding is partly provided by national available lifelong learning development funds (e.g. NL leert door ⁽⁴⁾, ESF programme). Important providers of training are private organisations that were initiated by employers in the sector, such as AT Techniekopleidingen ⁽⁵⁾ and OBM Oost ⁽⁶⁾. These private organisations offer formal VET qualifications (work-based learning: bbl) and shorter courses.

There are a number of exceptions of VET institutions that manage to play a larger role in the lifelong development of adults in the sector. One example is ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen, the adult learning section of a VET institution in the north of the country ⁽⁷⁾, offering a wide range of full VET programmes and modules. In terms of full VET programmes, the inflow of adults in work-based VET programmes (bbl) in electronics and mechatronics increased from 70 to 110 in recent years. 35 adult learners are employed by the armed forces and follow a tailored programme (Kennispunt MBO leven lang ontwikkelen, n.d.). Furthermore, the VET institution is in direct contact with companies to develop tailored training materials and offers a broad range of modules and shorter courses, ranging from safety and first aid to specific technical training courses ⁽⁸⁾.

Retail sector: shop assistant

The retail sector is composed of a food and a non-food component. In both sub-sectors, shop assistants are employed, but their role can be quite different. Furthermore, whether and how employees are trained is depending on whether the shop is a SME or a larger concern. In the latter, generally, more organised forms of training are provided. This case study focuses on the shop assistants in the non-food sector, covering shops. The sub-sector employs around 360,000 people . Every year around 15,000 VET students complete a retail-related VET programme. For the shop assistant this is around 3000 students (SBB, 2020a). In terms of educational attainment, around 30% of the employees has a diploma equivalent to EQF 2 or lower; 60% equivalent to EQF 3 and 4 (both VET and general education); and 10% equivalent to EQF 5-7 (higher education) (Bureau Bartels, 2019, p. 9). While the overall educational attainment level slightly increased in recent years, still the attainment is low. The digital transition, boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the sector, moving sales more and more to online webshops and mixed modes of sales. This calls for a change in the skills employees need to possess. As concluded in a 2017 study on the retail sector, even before

⁽¹⁾ [OOM - Wie is OOM?](#)

⁽²⁾ [Home - A+O Metalektro \(ao-metalektro.nl\)](#)

⁽³⁾ [oZone - Hét leerplatform voor de techniek - A+O Metalektro \(ao-metalektro.nl\)](#)

⁽⁴⁾ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiële-regelingen/nederland-leert-door>

⁽⁵⁾ [Over ons - Anton Tijdink Techniekopleidingen \(atopleidingen.nl\)](#)

⁽⁶⁾ [OBM Oost - OBM Opleidingen in de techniek. Metaal of mechatronica \(obm-opleidingen.nl\)](#)

⁽⁷⁾ <https://www.rocfriesepoort.nl/volwassenen/richtingen/techniek>

⁽⁸⁾ <https://www.rocfriesepoort.nl/volwassenen/richtingen/techniek>

the COVID-19 pandemic: “The job content and thus the required knowledge, skills and competences of employees are changing: 'porters' and order pickers in the distribution centers become a kind of operators, cashiers in supermarkets become service employees and managers in the retail sector get a larger 'span of control' and heavier commercial and logistical tasks. Employees – at the various levels and in both offline and online sales – are increasingly required to have a 't-shaped profile': in addition to professional and product knowledge, also customer knowledge and soft skills (such as customer focus, service-providing attitude, hostess and good social and communication skills). In addition, employees - also at the lower levels - must increasingly have digital skills. The need for ICT specialists at VET+ level is increasing (particularly in the webshops subsector and on the logistics side of the retail trade). All in all, there is therefore an upgrading of the staff.” (Panteia, 2017, pp. 81–82). The SBB trend report also mentions sustainability and conscious consuming, platform economy, personalised shopping and branch-transformation (i.e. merging services from different branches in one shopping experience) as key developments in the sector (SBB, 2021).

In general, the retail non-food sector is not training-minded. This comes to the surface already in the recruitment policies of employers, who often do not require a (VET) qualifications but assess whether people are communicatively and socially skilled. The employer will train the newly employed workers in the shop, offering mainly short workshops and courses, often offered through product suppliers. The change to online increased the demand for training in for instance online sales, social media campaigning, photography for web shops. These trainings are all offered by private providers. Furthermore, larger retail companies can have access to broad sets of online courses offered by online platforms such as SkillsTown or Goodhabitz ⁽⁹⁾

Collectively, the sector is traditionally not well organised and resources when it comes to offering financial support for training. The collective labour agreements hardly mention any training support. In recent years, partly supported by ESF funds, the non-food retail sector started an initiative ‘werk in de winkel’ [‘work in the shop’] ⁽¹⁰⁾ to stimulate training and learning, bringing together a large number of courses on offer and offering shorter instructions (video’s) that allow shop assistants to deal with practical challenges in their job. Also, national subsidies (NL leert door ⁽¹¹⁾), offer opportunities (2,000 training places for the sector) are used for upskilling.

In the sector, VET institutions play a marginal role. If retail employers work with VET institutions, then these retail companies are usually the large businesses and they work with the commercial part of the VET institutions (who basically are organised as private provider, but are part of a public school ⁽¹²⁾). The smaller companies usually make use of short courses offered by the private providers, or individual trainers that they know.

⁽⁹⁾ <https://skillstown.com/>; <https://www.goodhabitz.com/nl-nl/online-trainingen/>

⁽¹⁰⁾ <https://www.werkindewinkel.nl/over-werk-in-de-winkel>

⁽¹¹⁾ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen/leven-lang-ontwikkelen-financiële-regelingen/nederland-leert-door>; <https://www.werkindewinkel.nl/nl-leert-door>

⁽¹²⁾ See for instance NCVB bedrijfsopleidingen, being part of the Onderwijsgroep Tilburg: <https://www.ncvbbedrijfsopleidingen.nl/>

To summarise, 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.

Part 2: Further analysis of the selected policy development and the direction of travel

In this section, the policy developments in recent years are introduced, described and discussed in terms of results. The focus is on a board set of initiatives that together create an impetus for VET institutions to do more in lifelong development. While briefly introducing the separate measures, the focus is on the overall improved conditions for VET institutions to open up to adults and whether/how VET institutions respond to these conditions.

Problem statement and objective of the reform/ change

Against the background of the large reforms of the VET system in the 90s (Broek, forthcoming; Klarus, 2020), the plea for more flexibility in VET and more room for VET schools to provide training to adults emerged in the 2000s. This resulted in some changes (introduction of the ‘third learning pathway’ (derde leerweg) ⁽¹³⁾, besides the bol (school-based pathway) and bbl (work-based pathway) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011), but generally it remained challenging for VET institutions to compete in a market where private providers are the dominant players (NRTO, 2019b; Onderwijsraad, 2009). There are a number of reasons for this, relating to the policy context; the organisational structure of VET institutions; level of flexibility VET institutions have; the links with the labour market stakeholders; and financial possibilities. In a way, the underlying paradigm was that the learning of adults is primarily seen as something that is not a public concern and that is not subject to an overarching national policy.

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). Based on a broad approach and involvement of different stakeholders, a multi-annual action-oriented programme started with the ambition to strengthen people’s ability to take ownership on their own learning development, especially those that are most vulnerable. 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

⁽¹³⁾ 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.

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).

In the last decade, there is acknowledgement that in an effective adult learning system, there is also a role for publicly-funded VET schools, offering more flexible programmes tailored to the needs and situation of adults (such as shorter courses, or modules 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.

Hence, this case study looks not at one specific policy development, but a cluster of policy changes implemented in the last years that aim at making VET provision more flexible and to strengthen the potential role of VET institutions in the training of adults, both in formal qualifications and in shorter courses. In this, the case study focuses on more recent interventions taken in the context of life long development (Levenlang ontwikkelen (LLO) that also stimulated VET institutions to improve their orientation to adult learners. Altogether these policy measures establish a better environment for VET institutions to open-up to adults. The case study looks at whether the mindset of VET institutions towards lifelong development has changing (particularly focusing on the two sectors) and whether already changes can be seen of the policy orientation to lifelong development.

Change process and (institutional) context

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. In this there are three strands of action that together allow a more lifelong orientation of VET institutions:

- 1) **Changes to the legal frameworks and regulations for formal VET qualifications:** Through changes in the VET act, VET institutions are offered more flexibility in for instance offering certificates of units of full VET qualifications (MBO certificaat of MBO verklaring) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016), for instance based on the elective modules (keuzedelen) besides only full VET qualifications (ResearchNed, 2020). This also relates to relaxing the requirements for adults concerning civic education and labour market orientation obtaining a VET qualification.
- 2) **Support to make use of the flexibility in existing frameworks:** This relates to stimulating VET institutions to cooperate within local and regional skills development

ecosystems and 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). It also includes providing clear guidance on what is and what is not possible for VET institutions in organising lifelong development courses in the private market as a public institution. 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, 2020a). In addition, an expertise-platform (Kennispunt Leven Lang Ontwikkelen) is established by the VET sector on how VET institutions can organise lifelong development ⁽¹⁴⁾.

- 3) **Providing financial incentives:** There are various financial incentives to stimulate lifelong development. Most notably this concerns the ESF-supported subsidies on sustainable employment (NL leert door), or stimulating learning in SMEs ⁽¹⁵⁾ that offers an economic-sector approach to supporting individual learning; work-based learning financial support scheme (RVO, 2022); and 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 (March) 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. Furthermore, subsidies are available for VET institutions to develop lifelong learning opportunities in cooperation with other stakeholders (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2019). An overview of 13 funded initiatives and their intermediate results is published in 2021 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2021b).

Together, these three strands of action create an environment in which VET institutions can re-orient themselves towards lifelong development. There are some VET institutions that do, and others that are not there yet. The underlying theory is that VET institutions are autonomous and will have to see it in their own interest to focus on adult learning. As this comes with considerable institutional changes, reforms and adjustment of the mind-set, a long-term perspective is needed based on providing favourable (legal framework) conditions; knowledge exchange and development; partnerships and the right financial incentives. Concerning the latter, demand-side funding is prioritised, also given that it is legally challenging to provide direct public funding support to operate on private markets (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2004, 2021a).

Results and impact of the policy

In a broader perspective, the initiated measures and emphasis on lifelong development stimulated the development of regional lifelong development projects. The Social-Economic Council (Sociaal economische raad) devoted a publication to this listing more than 28 regional

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://levenlangontwikkelen.nl/over-ons/>

⁽¹⁵⁾ SLIM: subsidieregeling leren en ontwikkelen in het mkb: <https://www.uitvoeringvanbeleidszw.nl/subsidies-en-regelingen/slim>

projects building a regional infrastructure for lifelong learning. In these the VET institutions play a key role (SER, 2021). Overall, in recent years the attention in VET institutions to lifelong learning increased and more and more VET institutions rethink their offer to adult learners and their role in the regional skills development ecosystem while working together with labour market stakeholders. Conversations with 60 representatives of VET institutions on the role of VET institutions in lifelong learning (commissioned by the Kennispunt MBO Leven Lang Ontwikkelen (Knowledge point VET and lifelong development) revealed that all VET institutions see a role for themselves in lifelong learning (Hutspot, 2019; Kennispunt MBO leven lang ontwikkelen, 2019). This mainly in serving companies and organisations in training their employees in groups, but also by working together with PES and municipalities in offering language education to migrants and training programmes for individuals at distance from the labour market. The offer of the VET institutions are formal work-based learning programmes at mbo level 4 (equivalent to EQF 4), meaning that the student will go one day to school and will work 4 days in the company. The offer of tailored, shorter courses is still limited within VET institutions and is developed on demand. Some VET institutions are more developed in this regards, conducted market research on the needs and establishing organisational units (with account managers) to serve this market. The VET institutions also acknowledge the impact lifelong development has on increasing the flexibility in initial VET. Finally, they also see still a lot of challenges in really making lifelong development within the VET institutions a reality (Hutspot, 2019).

In organising lifelong learning and playing a role in the skills ecosystem, four broad organisational types are identified in which VET institutions play a role. These four types are determined by crossing two dimensions, namely focus (formal and non-formal education and training); and positioning (VET institution in the lead ('binnen') and others in the lead ('buiten')) (Katapult & Kennispunt MBO leven lang ontwikkelen, 2019):

- 1) **Developer:** VET institution and companies are equal partners in co-creating post-initial and initial education and training provision. The learning is less oriented to formalisation (e.g. qualification) and more on practical applicability of new skills and knowledge. The ownership of the activities lies primarily at the VET institution.
- 2) **Trainer:** The VET institution takes the lead and involves labour market stakeholders as advisors. The focus is on the initial education and training and training towards a qualification (civil effect).
- 3) **Catalyser:** In a joint team, VET institutions and labour market stakeholders work together in organising VET through sharing facilities, joint teacher-trainer development, establishing a learning culture. The focus is on practical application of what is learned and to align the supply and demand for skills.
- 4) **Entrepreneur:** VET institutions and labour market stakeholders cooperate while clearly separating roles. The VET institution is the educational expert, the matching of supply and demand is the responsibility of the labour market stakeholders. Still, there is a focus on qualifications as gateways to occupations.

Some VET institutions are further developed in terms of lifelong development than others. In general, the VET institutions position themselves as skills-development partner to

companies and from that perspective offer VET training to employees. They target slightly less individual adults to enrol in VET programmes. The latter is more developed in the higher education sector (mainly by the Universities of Applied Sciences).

Despite the increased awareness of VET institutions to work on lifelong learning, the policy measures did not yet result in increased participation rates in lifelong learning and in increased participation in VET-related provision more specifically. Also, the aim to establish a learning culture is not yet achieved, as concluded in the recent studies (de Grip, 2021; Maslowski & Vogels, 2019).

Part 3: Changed epistemological and pedagogical perspective

In this part, a number of examples is presented of how VET institutions amended their offer to better serve adults.

Organisation and content of specific programmes in manufacturing and retail

In the **manufacturing sector**, an example of VET programmes that were amended through the broad policy initiatives focusing on lifelong learning in the manufacturing sector can be found at VET institution Aventus ⁽¹⁶⁾, working together with a private provider Litop (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2021b, pp. 10–11). They found that in the mechanical- and process industry it is impossible for employers to train groups of employees as they work in shifts. Hence there was a felt need for more tailored and flexible VET provision at mbo level 1, 2 and 3 (respectively equivalent to EQF 1, 2 and 3). The VET institutions rewrote the entire VET programmes into e-learning modules; developed personalised learning pathways and developed learning materials appropriate for the language capacities of the learners. Furthermore, stacking courses was made possible together with digital assessment. This also included training of examiners and in-company trainers to facilitate the process. The content did not as such change and still the formal learning outcomes as described in the qualification files are the main reference point for the delivery and the assessment. However, all the material was digitalised and enriched with 360 degree photo's of the production lines. The initiative is directly funded through the subsidy programme for the Ministry of Education, but also relies on a broader support in the VET institution to progress in the area of lifelong development. The main clients at this point are the companies interested in training and upskilling their employees, however, given the introduction of the STAP budget, offering individuals the financial resources to select training programmes, also individuals are targeted. A landing page is recently launched (Aventus & Litop, 2022). The revised learning material is also used in the regular training in the work-based and school-based pathways. For instance, it is very informative for a 16 year old student, not having yet is safety and security certificate to already orient him/herself in the production venue before starting the internship.

Another example concerns the mechatronic VET programmes for employees of the armed forces, delivered by ROC Friese Poort ⁽¹⁷⁾. The programme follow the qualification files, but are in the way they are delivered adjusted to the context of the armed forces. This means that

⁽¹⁶⁾ See Aventus and Litop VET programmes: <https://www.ventus.nl/aanmelden-litop-opleidingen>

⁽¹⁷⁾ <https://www.rocfrieseport.nl/defensiemedewerkers>

the programme are offered in a flexible manner, allow interruptions (for missions), and training is provided at the armed forces premises. The training for adults at ROC Friese Poort is organised separately from the initial VET programmes (ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen). This institution has a long (25 years) tradition is focusing on adult learning, that started with the request from the Armed Forces, but this is taken up as a strategic objective within the VET institution. The separate organisation (ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen) consists of 35 employees working on sales and account management organising adult learning programmes making use of the expertise of staff within the IVET provider. Hence, the staff within the IVET provider is mobilised to provide the learning of adults. In addition, innovations in adult learning (such as offering more flexible provision, using online learning platforms) is also integrated in the regular IVET programmes. ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen targets both employers (to provide upskilling of employees) and individual learners. The policy developments are seen as providing more opportunities to tailor the provision to adults.

Besides these examples, there are also other more sector-specific institutes ⁽¹⁸⁾ that offer formal VET programmes (again fully in line with the qualification files) and they offer specific courses being in demand in the sector. In general, these more privately-organised institutions are better equipped than the traditional public VET institutions to serve companies with their training needs.

An example in the **retail sector** is NCVB bedrijfsopleidingen ⁽¹⁹⁾, being part of the Onderwijsgroep Tilburg (ROC van Tilburg). This is the organisation within the VET institution responsible for offering VET programmes to companies. It does this mainly by offering and tailoring formal VET programmes and shorter VET modules/courses to companies' needs. This is for instance the case in the retail sector, where NCVB is responsible for the training of shop assistants for a large drugstore/beauty shop chain. Again, this concerns basically a traditional work-based learning pathway whereby the employee works 4 days and goes to school for one day ⁽²⁰⁾. Besides the traditional work-based VET programmes that are also accessible for adults (new employees that want to obtain a formal VET qualification while working), the role of public VET providers in reskilling and upskilling in the retail sector is limited. This is, as already indicated, mostly done by small training providers, larger private training providers and online training providers.

Legitimacy of the programmes

The legitimacy of the formal VET programmes is derived from the sectorally agreed learning outcomes as stated in the qualification files. Furthermore, at the side of employers, there are clear ideas about quality of different VET providers, whereby the more sectorally specialised institutes have a slight preference above the public VET institutions, who are generally more perceived as being 'educational' and being less responsive to labour market needs (although this perspective is shifting). Concerning the VET leading to acquisition of specific vocational/ occupation-specific skills and not leading to a formal qualification (shorter

⁽¹⁸⁾ Such as Anton Tjinkcollege: <https://www.atopleidingen.nl/>; and OBM Oost. <https://obm-opleidingen.nl/obm-oost/>

⁽¹⁹⁾ <https://www.ncvbedrijfsopleidingen.nl/>

⁽²⁰⁾ See interview Susan Lether from A.S. Watson: "[Een gezamenlijk doel](#)" - [NCVB Bedrijfsopleidingen](#)

courses), the legitimacy is mainly derived from the standing of the training provider (whether it is a private or public institution) in the sector and the connections the VET institution has with the employers. In this, the employers are the main costumers, not the individual adults. While some public VET institutions are making steps in offering courses in the ‘third learning pathway’⁽²¹⁾, targeting individuals directly, this is not yet proven to be very successful. The policy initiatives in the recent past, as well as the currently implemented STAP (Incentive Labour market Position) allowance scheme, seem to favour more the private training providers. Furthermore, there are indications that the financial incentives for learners do not increase participation in VET or specific occupation-related courses and seem to be taken up more by higher educated than people with a lower level qualification (Salomons & Wouterse, 2022; Van der Heyden & Schram, 2022).

Main differences over time

Within the observed period 2005-2020, for all formal VET programmes offered to adults, the content did not change radically. Furthermore, the way theoretical knowledge, skills, attitudes are conceived and jointly delivered has not changed, and is not different from how this is conceived and delivered in initial VET. The reference point for any formal VET qualification (be it offered to young people or adults) is the described learning outcomes included in the qualification files. While these throughout the years are undergoing regular updates and revisions (also more profound changes as a result of restructuring the qualification files model), there are no substantial changes of content that can currently be allocated to the changes in making VET better suitable to adult learners. If VET institutions make changes to their offer to better suit adults this is often more related to:

- 1) The delivery mode of the VET programme, offering more personalised and flexible pathways within a VET programme and offering more in blended learning modes. This also meant a change in the learning approach, with more self-directed learning and autonomy of the adult learner. Furthermore, as the learning takes place more in the work-place and online, the role of the traditional teacher is less prominent and more hybrid forms of teachers, combining teaching and working in companies, especially in the technical sectors, is considered having a high added value for the adult learner, the VET institution and the companies (A+O Metalektro, 2021).
- 2) The form of the VET offer, offering shorter courses, either being part of formal VET programmes or separate courses specifically addressing companies’ training needs or targeting individual adults. As indicated, the public VET institutions struggle with setting up a functional infrastructure to sustainably support offering short courses for individual learners and compete on this training market.

⁽²¹⁾ 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.

Part 4: Conclusions and reflections

After a 'loss in momentum' concerning lifelong learning between 2011 and 2017 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020b, p. 7), the political and public awareness for lifelong learning and lifelong development increased in recent years, especially with the publication of the Policy on lifelong development (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, 2018) and the subsequent plethora of different measures, subsidies, experimentation schemes, even further increased in number, budgetary size in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. All this however did not manage to 1) establish a learning culture, 2) increase participation in adult learning; 3) reach especially those who need (vocational) training the most.

What the policy initiatives did for the VET sector concerns that it contributed to a change in the mindset to lifelong learning as something that is essential for the VET institutions in the future. Also, a start is made to make VET provision better suited for adults (offering more flexibility, personalisation in delivery, more modular approaches). On the other hand, the policy initiatives insufficiently created favourable conditions for public VET institutions to establish a sustainable infrastructure for lifelong development.

Economic sectors differ in their initial lifelong learning orientation and the policy initiatives did not significantly change this orientation. In retail, the training-mindset still needs to be further developed. In manufacturing, this mindset was already present in the past. The subsidies (e.g. NL leert door') are used by employees in the sectors, but it remains unclear whether these employees would have participated anyway (funded by the employer).

This situation will probably not radically change unless significant reforms are initiated based on the idea that adult learning is a public concern instead of a private concern. This would open the discussion about establishing a sustainable infrastructure for adult learning where public VET institutions have an important role to play. Furthermore, additional support measures are needed to improve the lifelong learning orientation within specific sectors (for instance retail) and more broadly in the society and economy. Different studies mention some form of individual learning account, or entitlements for learning, extensive and regular (career) guidance services (Commissie Regulering van Werk, 2020, p. 89; de Grip, 2021). Furthermore, specifically for VET, it would be helpful if more flexibility is offered to leave out some of the generic parts of the VET qualification (e.g. citizenship, languages and career orientation) in programmes for adults, as often this might be less relevant for them and prevents them to enrol in formal VET programmes.

Annex to case study report

List of interviewees/ informants

Please provide the following information:

- Name (Mr/Ms, forename, surname)
- Organisation and function
- Please ask whether the interviewees/informants agree that his/her name will be included in the final publication (in case Cedefop decides to list interviewees)!

Country	Name	Organisation and function	Contact information (Email, phone)	Date of interview	Agreement* – yes/no
NL	Barbara Geerlings	Beleidsadviseur Werkgeverszaken - INretail			
NL	Dorien Krassenberg	Beleidsadviseur onderwijs - INretail			
NL	Marianne van Loenhout	Beleidsmedewerker onderwijszaken – Koninklijke Metaalunie			
NL	Marco Mazereeuw	Lector en practor Beroepsgerichte didactiek en Leven Lang Ontwikkelen - NHL Stenden Hogeschool en Friesland College			
NL	Pia Deveneijns	beleidsadviseur strategie & onderwijs – Mbo Raad			
NL	Fokko de Gans	Project manager Aventus			
NL	Saskia Visser	Director ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen			
NL	Riemie Zuiderveld	Accountmanager ROC Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen			

Major publicly subsidised upskilling and qualification-upgrading programmes open to adults in the Netherlands

Programme name in English (and in an official language of the country) Short description Governing body	When established	Funding sources	Qualification level	Participation data
<p>Junior general secondary education for adults (Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs –Middelbaar algemeen voortgezet onderwijs (VAVO-MAVO niveau))</p> <p>These part-time (second-chance) programmes lead to the same qualification as the equivalent full-time (initial education) programmes. They are open to young students who have failed their examinations and to adults who have not previously obtained a secondary-level qualification. VMBO-tl (Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs – theoretische leerweg; previously MAVO) is pre-vocational education, which provides access to upper secondary vocational education.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.</p>	> 5 years ago	NF (national Funding), PF (private funding)	ISCED 244	2 702 (2018/19)
<p>Senior general secondary education for adults (Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs – Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs (VAVO-HAVO))</p> <p>These part-time (second-chance) programmes lead to the same qualification as the equivalent full-time (initial education) programmes. They are open to young students who have failed their examinations and to adults who have not previously obtained an upper secondary qualification. The qualification awarded on completion provides access to higher vocational education.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.</p>	> 5 years ago	NF, PF	ISCED 344	10 042 (2018/19)
<p>Senior general secondary education for adults (Voortgezet algemeen volwassenenonderwijs – Vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs (VAVO-VWO))</p> <p>These part-time (second-chance) programmes lead to the same qualification as the equivalent full-time (initial education) programmes. They are open to young students who have failed their examinations and to adults who have not previously obtained an upper secondary qualification. The qualification awarded on completion provides access to university.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.</p>	> 5 years ago	NF, PF	ISCED 344	4 395 (2018/19)
<p>Vocational education and training (Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs) These programmes are open to both young people and adults. There are two pathways – a school-based pathway and a work-based pathway – and four different levels. Depending on the level, a vocational education and training programme takes between one and four years to complete. The duration also depends on the extent of the validation of prior learning.</p> <p>*Data refer to adult participants (aged around 25 and above) at the four levels combined. The total number of participants (young people and adults; the four levels combined) was 507 100 in 2020.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science</p>	> 5 years ago	NF, PF	ISCED 254, 353, 354, 454 / EQF 1-4	62 807* (2020)

<p>Dutch as a second language (Nederlands als tweede taal I en II) Courses I and II in Dutch as a second language prepare students for the state examination in this subject. This examination is for people whose first language is not Dutch. The purpose of the examination is to show that their proficiency in Dutch is good enough to work or study in the Netherlands.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.</p>	<p>> 5 years ago (1992)</p>	<p>NF, PF</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>20 799 (2017)</p>
<p>Dutch and arithmetic (Nederlandse taal en rekenen) and digital skills (Digitale vaardigheden) Courses aimed at adults who want to boost their literacy, numeracy or digital skills. Target groups include illiterate adults and adults who want to improve their basic skills in order to enrol in vocational education and training. They are also aimed at adults for whom Dutch is a second language.</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and municipalities (the latter receive a nationally allocated budget for this type of provision in their region).</p>	<p>> 5 years ago</p>	<p>NF</p>	<p>N/A (qualification in some cases)</p>	<p>No data</p>

Source: (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021, pp. 194–195)

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