

Features of vocational training and professional development in the Netherlands

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0. Background and country context

Demographics

The Netherlands has approximately 16.5 million inhabitants. With a country size of 41,526 km² The Netherlands is the most densely populated country of the EU after Malta, with on average almost 500 inhabitants per km². The population is distributed in age groups as follows: 0-19 years (4 million), 20-64 (10.1 million) and 65+ (2.4 million).

Political structure

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy and has had a bicameral parliamentary system since 1848. Central government is the highest layer of administration. However, a trend towards decentralisation began many years ago and is still under way: tasks and responsibilities are progressively being transferred to lower levels of government, provinces or municipalities.

The Netherlands comprises 12 provinces with their own tasks and responsibilities, although minimal in education and training policy. The Netherlands counts 483 municipalities; a trend continues to restructure government at local level by merging several small towns into bigger municipalities. Regional cooperation among municipalities on a geographical basis is common.

Municipalities have more involvement in administering education and training: they are responsible for public schools; for introducing measures to counteract underachievement; and for planning adult education. The distribution of tasks and finances was one of the items in the 1996 Adult and Vocational Education Act (WEB: Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs).

Labour market and economy (data from CBS)

In 2006 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was 32,700. This puts The Netherlands in the top 5 of the EU-27 after Luxemburg, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden. The GDP per capita index is 130.8, with the EU-27 average being 100.

The total working population is around 7.4 million (2005). The participation rate in The Netherlands was 63% (men between 15 and 65: 72%, women between 15 and 65: 54%). Unemployment rates usually vary between 3 and 7 percent.

The ageing population is a growing problem in The Netherlands. Employment participation among elderly above the age of 55 is less than 50%. The government stimulates people to keep working until they reach the legal retirement age of 65. Government policies to increase participation in that age group are restricted to the reduction of financial conditions that allow for early retirement.

Lifelong learning policy

Government policy in the Netherlands aims at the promotion of innovation in the economy. The stimulation of the participation of people in society and especially in economic life also is a priority. The attention for upgrading the level of education and training of the population is linked to these social and economic priorities. Employers organisations and trade unions both consider vocational training and development as a serious need. Their own efforts are however mainly restricted to the already employed. The support of people in need of access to economic life is expected to be provided by publicly funded bodies. A typical feature of the Dutch social system is that the so-called social partners: employers, trade unions and the government intensively work together in a whole series of public bodies also in the field of vocational education and training.

Policy in vocational education and training is generally constituted in the Netherlands at three levels:

- * national level (ministries, umbrella organisations, support or advisory organisations, examination institutions and national social partner organisations)
- * sectoral level (social partners organisations per sector, national expertise centres for vocational training and the labour market)
- * regional/local level (regional training centres, private training centres, municipalities, regionally organised social partner organisations).

The ministries that are involved include the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Welfare and Health, and the Ministry of Agriculture.

In 2004 an action plan for life long learning has been set up at national level. This plan contains several goals connected to vocational education and training, like:

- * improving the accessibility of and enhancing participation in education and training
- * more attention for the accreditation of prior learning
- * increasing the amount of higher educated
- * increasing employment participation
- * increasing labour productivity
- * more cooperation between education centres and companies
- * developing combinations of learning and working
- * a better exchange of knowledge between knowledge centres and business
- * special forms of support for vulnerable groups and prevention of drop out
- * the decrease of youth unemployment
- * the promotion of social cohesion

1. How is the work and training of trainers organised?

The continuing vocational education of (prospective) employees is an important field of vocational training and development in addition to the initial education provided by the school system. In-company activities and external education and training are strongly interconnected in the Netherlands. In sectors as the financial services or the health services sectoral training institutions for instance have an important role. Many companies make use of the support of public or private institutions to provide for their training and development needs. These institutions do not only offer courses, they also often bring their trainers into in-company activities and they advise companies with regard to learning and development in organisations.

For the analysis of the organisation of vocational training and professional development a closer look at the structure of the Dutch economy is needed. Over the last decades The Netherlands has shown a transformation from an agricultural and industrial economy into a service and knowledge economy. Only 4% of the working population still has an occupation in agriculture and 17% in the manufacturing and building industry. The majority of the working population is active in the commercial services (45%) and in the non-commercial services (33%) (CBS, 2005). Sectors in which the focus is on knowledge-work and continuous professional development have a growing significance, both in the private as in the public sphere.

The total number of companies and organisations in the private and the public sector in the Netherlands amounts to about 800.000 (CBS, 2008). Although the Netherlands, as compared to other countries, has relatively many large-scale enterprises (over 500 employees), their number only is 1400; another 1500 enterprises have 250-500 employees. These two categories together employ over 40% of the working population. The small and medium enterprise sector (SME) (up to 250 employees) comprises 99% of all companies and organisations; the SME sector as a whole has 4,2 million employees. Nearly 600.000 companies and organisations are one or two (wo)man businesses.

The size of companies and organisations is an important condition for the organisation of training and development. Companies with over 500 employees usually are the only ones that have their own HRD departments. Smaller companies usually do not have their own training departments and companies with under 50 employees hardly know specific HRM or HRD functions (Bergenhengouwen et al., 2002).

Research into post-initial vocational training and development in the private sector is regularly carried out by the CBS, starting in 1986 and repeated in 1990, 1993 and 1999; the most recent research dates from 2005. In 2005 one in seven of all companies in the private sector had a person or department that was responsible for HRD policy within the company. Approximately 9% of all companies with ten employees or more had their own training centre. More than 50% sought advice from external parties. They hired private training agencies to provide the necessary training in-company or send their employees to an outside training centre. Furthermore, 22% of all companies had a documented HRD policy and 27% said they have a special budget for training and development of their employees.

In 2005 seven out of every ten companies with more than ten employees in the private sector facilitated some kind of continuing vocational training and development for their employees. This was done in the form of courses (67%), workplace learning (30%) or forms of self-directed learning (41%). Bigger companies offer more educational facilities to their employees, probably due to the fact they have larger financial means. More than 1,3 million employees in the private sector took part in vocational courses, that is to say nearly 40% of the employees of the companies that offer some kind of education or training. In total they spent over 47 million working hours on courses. This means an average of 36 hours per employee (Claessen & Nieuweboer, 2007).

Branch and sector organizations that are cooperatives of the social partners play a central role in vocational education and training especially for small and medium sized enterprises. These forms of cooperation often involve also the government and its regulations. The branch and sector organizations also fulfil an important task in the communication between their branches of business and formal education. A clear example of the typical Dutch cooperation between social partners and government in the field of vocational education and training are the Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business (KBB). The Expertise Centres originate from the need for knowledge development and qualified personnel of specific sectors of business. These centres each cover a group of connected branches. 'Sector' is a broad concept because the distinctions between sectors and branches are more and more blurring; consequently various Expertise Centres have been merging over the last ten years. Presently there are seventeen Expertise Centres that take part in a cooperation called COLO (common body of expertise centres).

The Expertise Centres do offer specific vocational courses and training for employees, but their role has become much broader. The Expertise Centres promote the integration of learning in working processes by the establishment of apprenticeship places in companies. They look for companies that open possibilities for work orientation and apprenticeships. They care for the accreditation and the quality of these 'training companies'. They support and train the supervisors who guide the apprentices within the companies. They support the companies in their branch of business in developing the organisation and its learning potential. They also see to the innovation and maintenance of the qualification structure for their branches of business.

The Expertise Centres not only promote the quality of the training companies in the branches concerned; they also care for the input of their sector in the field of vocational education, as formal education cannot fill in this field alone. They translate the needs of the branches of business concerned in profiles of competencies. They also have a (shared) responsibility for examination requirements in (preparatory) secondary vocational education. Comparable contacts with higher professional education exist on a more informal basis.

These activities have become the core business of the Expertise Centres as a consequence of the adult and vocational education act (WEB: Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs) that regulates since 1996 the relation between business life and vocational education. This act constitutes an integral framework for vocational education and general adult education.

It can be said that the Expertise Centres create an integration of IVET and CVET. The apprenticeship places constitute a work-based learning route that offers the opportunity for vocational development as well to people entering the labour market (especially youngsters) as to people striving for improvement of their qualification. In 2005, almost 40% of all companies in the Netherlands offered apprenticeships (ibid.).

To be complete it is useful to note that secondary vocational education offers, next to the support of apprenticeships by the work-based learning route, a school-based (learn-work or dual) learning route. In the latter case it is a legal obligation that at least 20% of the total curriculum is spent on practical training within an enterprise. The tendency is to increase the proportion of the total curriculum that is spent on practical training; it is now quite common that this proportion is about 30-40%. Recent research among training companies has however shown that they experience difficulties with the amount of time that the practical training requires. The companies indicate that the required time investment approaches the limits from an (entrepreneurial) economic perspective (Detmar & De Vries, 2006).

2. How is the work and training of trainers financed?

The total investment that companies and organisations in the private and the public sector make in HRD services in The Netherlands, amounts to 3,1 billion Euro a year (data from CBS, 2005). It has to be considered that only 27% of all companies with ten employees or more has a special budget for training and development of their employees. The specific expenditure on training courses exceeded 1,7 billion Euro. This means an average of €1300 per course member. These costs include payment to training and educational institutions (77%), study costs (5%), material costs (6%) and payment of company-based training staff (13%) (Claessen & Nieuweboer, 2007).

The financing of vocational training and development is primarily the responsibility of the companies and organisations concerned. This financial responsibility however is, just as much as the practice of vocational education and training described above, embedded in a large set of agreements between social partners and governmental facilities.

Government policies aim at the creation of attractive conditions for companies and employees to take part in vocational training and development. The financial involvement of the government in in-company vocational training and development especially concerns tax facilities. Costs of training and development generally are tax-deductible. Individual employees are permitted to deduce their costs for vocational training and development from their income tax. The act on the reduction of dues (WVA: Wet Vermindering Afdracht Onderwijs) is a tax regulation that stimulates companies to offer training and development facilities to their employees. For instance, the supply of an apprenticeship allows for a compensation that amounts up to €2655 and an employer who offers an APL trajectory to an employee collects €319. Research in seven branches of SME however showed that only 60% of the investigated companies make use of the tax deduction through the WVA (Detmar & De Vries, 2006).

Employer organisations and trade unions make Collective Labour Agreements (CAO's). These CAO's often include agreements on the provision and funding of continuing vocational training and professional development activities for employees. The financial means that become available this way are deployed by the Education and Development Funds (O&O fondsen). Companies and organisations can recover part of their costs through a subsidy of the Education and Development Fund of their particular sector or branch. These funds increasingly initiate also themselves vocational

training and development activities for the companies and organisations in the sector or branch concerned. However, not all branches and sectors have such a fund.

Support from ESF funds is also involved here in many cases. ESF subsidies are especially used for the education and training of unemployed with a view to enhance their employability.

Specific indications for the financial organisation, the costs and investments made in training and development can be found in a study on seven branches of SME, representing about 25% of the total sector of SME in the Netherlands (Detmar & De Vries, 2006). Many companies in the SME sector are accredited as 'training companies' that offer jobs for apprentices. In 85% of the companies in the 'exemplary' branches studied the supervisors who guide the apprentices have followed a basic course to fulfil their task; this is a requirement resulting from the accreditation as a training company. These courses take one to four days and the costs vary from €150 to €1000. Refresher courses are a common feature.

The supervision of an apprentice on average takes 200 hours a year. The total costs of the supervision of an apprentice are estimated at €7000. The supervisors usually are regular employees, who mostly do their educational work mostly as a part of their job. Their salary hence also covers their educational activities. They may be in a higher pay-scale than employees doing the same work, without the extra tasks, but this is not necessarily the case.

The apprentices themselves have a learn-labour contract. On the average they do productive labour for two third of their working hours. The total labour costs of apprentices amount to nearly 1,8 billion Euro. Several conditional costs involve 109 million Euro. Companies themselves contribute 51 million Euro to educational funds and they receive from these funds and other subsidies 72 million Euro (Claessen & Nieuweboer, 2007). The Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business and their common body COLO play a central role in the organisation of apprenticeships in training companies. Funding of the expertise centres and COLO is provided partly public and partly by the sectors themselves; their budget amounts to €105 million.

3. How are trainers selected and how are human resources allocated?

A separate 'occupation' of trainer in vocational training and development does not exist in the Netherlands. Companies and organisations in the private and in the public sector make all kinds of efforts to keep up the knowledge and competences of their employees and of newcomers to the business. A wide variety of teachers, trainers, instructors, supervisors, mentors, coaches, assessors, advisers, counsellors, intermediaries and rehabilitation, reintegration, guidance and employment officers, etc. are involved in these efforts. Obviously there is no statistical information available on the total number of these 'practitioners in vocational training and development' in the Netherlands. Some data however are available on specific fields of training and development described in paragraph 1.

As described above, many companies in the SME sector are accredited as 'training companies' that offer jobs for apprentices. The number of companies accredited for apprenticeships amounts to about 180.000. Some of these training companies have very few (sometimes even one) employees, other have 40-50 employees. In the training companies about 200.000 supervisors are involved in the guidance of apprentices, mostly as a part of their job. The total number of apprentices involved is about 500.000 (data from COLO). In general there still are not enough places for apprentices available to host all participants in vocational education and training.

The Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business (KBB) are not only responsible for the accreditation of training companies; their tasks go much further. They advise the organizations how to increase the possibilities for vocational training and development and they support and train the supervisors who guide the apprentices within the companies. The Expertise Centres employ about 900 educational counsellors to accomplish these tasks.

The adult and vocational education act (WEB) has created a strong link between the Expertise Centres and the 42 Regional Education and Training Centres (ROC's) and 11 Agricultural Education and Training Centres (AOC's); these are the providers of secondary vocational education in the regular school system. Most of these education and training centres also have a private training institute or commercial department through which they provide continuing vocational training programmes.

An extended branch of private agencies that provide trainings and courses, has developed the last decades in the Netherlands. Many companies make use of their services for their vocational training and development activities. The number of such agencies has increased from 2520 in 1996 to 9840 agencies in 2006. From these 9840 agencies 7930 concern individual self-employed and 1415 have 1 to 5 employees, so there are 495 agencies with more than 5 employees (data from CBS).

4. How are trainers qualified?

Practitioners in vocational training and development are recruited through open or internal application procedures by companies and organisations in the private and in the public sector. The standards are set by these employers themselves. They can hire people with experience as teachers in regular education or people who have worked as trainers in other enterprises, training companies or educational institutes. Moving through from formal education to the field of vocational training and development however occurs less as used to be the case. Depending on the subject matter the focus for recruitment can also be on subject expertise (for example in technical branches like ICT). Recruitment and selection often takes place within the field. Working in vocational training and development is a job that often is achieved in a later stage in the career; this means that work experience and expert knowledge acquired during the career are more important than specific certificates in the area of education.

Practitioners in vocational training and development have a large variety of educational backgrounds; their levels vary from secondary vocational education 'plus' to higher professional education and university degrees. There however is in the Netherlands only one specific full higher education course (at a higher professional education institute) to become an expert in vocational training and development. Several universities and higher professional education institutes offer specialisation courses in the field of HRD. Given the variety of professional roles in the field of vocational training and development (teachers, trainers, instructors, supervisors, mentors, coaches, assessors, advisers, counsellors, intermediaries and rehabilitation, reintegration, guidance and employment officers, etc.) it is understandable that these people have their backgrounds in an even wide variety of disciplines, however mostly from the social sciences and from business administration. An interesting phenomenon is that from some professional fields (e.g. reintegration) initiatives are taken to create corresponding specialisation courses at higher professional education institutes. In the qualifications and competences of these 'modern' HRD experts knowledge of the labour market, organizational sensitivity, networking, acquisition and seeking opportunities are more prominent than didactic qualifications.

Another, equally important, access to professions in in-company training and development traditionally goes through expert knowledge and competence. This especially is the case in fields where transfer of knowledge and skills is important. Here we find subject experts who develop themselves to practical trainers and then achieve a function in vocational training and development. The educational qualification here is subordinate to subject expertise; educational qualification is to be acquired by way of supplement or is supposed to grow naturally.

The supervisors who provide the guidance of apprentices in training companies, are mainly regular employees. They are skilled and experienced workers, so they have expert knowledge of the field in which they guide apprentices. They often execute their educational tasks part-time in addition to their

regular work within the company. The recruitment of supervisors is the responsibility of the companies themselves.

The Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business (KBB's) see to the accreditation of training companies. A requirement for accreditation is that the supervisors are educationally qualified, for instance through obtaining a certificate from a didactical training provided by the Expertise Centres. Yearly about 10% of the 200.000 supervisors participates in some form of training organized by them. The length of a basic 'trainers' course varies from one to four or five days. The Expertise Centres determine the contents of these courses; within their cooperation in COLO they consult each other on issues such as the competences that trainers need, the quality criteria and assurance with regard to training companies and the impact of educational innovation for both of these.

Some Expertise Centres require that in addition to the basic course, trainers should follow further professional development activities on an annual or bi-annual basis. Other Expertise Centres also provide opportunities for further professional development, but make participation not mandatory. The educational counsellors of the Expertise Centres regularly visit the training companies, advise as to improving the learning potential of the organisation and offer feed back to the supervisors concerned. Most of the educational counsellors themselves are typical examples of the higher educated 'modern' HRD experts mentioned above. The professional activities of these educational counsellors cover a broad area:

- * observing developments in the labour market at national, sectoral and regional level
- * observing developments in the structure of qualifications at various levels
- * translation of these developments in educational needs and goals
- * observing innovation processes in sectors and translating these in HR policies
- * building networks and maintaining contacts with companies and educational institutions
- * building networks and maintaining contacts with labour market institutions and other stakeholders
- * attraction, support and recognition of companies that offer apprenticeships
- * extension of apprenticeship places in organizations
- * support of practical in-service trainers

Raising the attractiveness of educational functions to broader groups of professionals is a general concern of life long learning policies. In comparison to school-based education, recruiting educational practitioners from outside the sector is common practice in the field of vocational training and development. The focus is on capabilities, competences and knowledge and less on formal qualification. This also means that attention will be paid to the accreditation of prior learning or other ways than the regular teacher training courses (Cedefop, 2005).

5. How is the reputation of trainers and how are they integrated in enterprises/society?

In-company education and training used to be a specific service that often was organised in training centres outdoors. Training and development since then have become more and more integrated in the organisation and in working processes and so did the profession of the educators and trainers who now have often changed into HRD experts.

The integration of HRD experts in the organisation gives them a higher status. The professionals concerned have a status that is formally at least an equivalent of that of other employees with the same background and experience. They usually are higher educated (university or higher professional education) and they receive high salaries accordingly. Their conditions of employment are at least equal to those in formal education and often compare to those in the open market. The different position of HRD experts as compared to professionals in formal education and the public sphere finds expression in a stronger product orientation, higher salaries, more fringe benefits, less guarantees and a higher mobility.

The status of these professionals also depends on the way that training and development are valued within a company and on the HRD policy pursued. This includes not only the provision of courses, but also the availability of training centres, the staffing of HRD departments, evaluation and quality assurance procedures, and the amount of budgets (see paragraph 1).

As mentioned before, the supervisors in the training companies are almost always regular employees that are also responsible for training (often in the form of apprenticeships). This means that their formal status is the same as that of the other employees. Because they have a large work experience and they are somewhat older on the average, a certain authority is ascribed to them and so their status is relatively high on an informal level.

6. How innovative is the work and training of trainers?

In a growing knowledge economy (which is the case in the Netherlands) many jobs are subject to a continuous increase of complexity, broadening of responsibility and deepening of expertise; as a consequence professional development becomes an integrated element of the duties concerned. In professional development demand-steering prevails over the supply of traditional education and training. According to Bolhuis and Simons (1999) and Bergenhenegouwen et al. (2002) the role of educators and trainers simultaneously transforms into the facilitating of learning; features of this transformation are:

- * the shift from education and training to stimulating diverse forms of learning, esp. self directed learning
- * the growing importance of work-based learning
- * replacement of training by coaching
- * the role of intermediary in making learning facilities (indoors and outdoors) accessible
- * decreasing significance of big training departments
- * increasing role of ICT in learning, such as e-learning
- * more attention for learning in teams and organisational development

As to the quality and the innovation of education and training the Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business (KBB's) mentioned above are to be considered as an example of 'good practice'. They play a key role in the communication between education and business life, because they connect a diversity of important functions:

- * they organise apprenticeship places in training companies
- * they see to the accreditation of these training companies
- * they provide the training courses for the supervisors in the training companies
- * they offer consultancy to organisations in their branch of business
- * they supply vocational training and development activities for their branch
- * they keep in touch with companies regarding their need for qualified human resources
- * they keep up to date the qualification structure in their branches
- * they care for the input of their branches (profiles of competencies, examination requirements) in formal education

The educational counsellors that carry out the tasks of the Expertise Centres are to be considered as key figures in the knowledge society. The Expertise Centres develop the professional profiles for these 'modern' HRD experts; they offer internal and external trainings to them and they try to promote cooperation, networking and exchange of knowledge among them (an inventory of quality requirements and the promotion of professionalism of the educational counsellors is actually carried out by COLO, the common body of the expertise centres)

As to the quality of HRD services CEDEO (an agency founded in 1980 with support of the Ministry of Economic Affairs) certifies agencies that provide these services. About 300 providers have obtained

certification. CEDEO has also started a registration of relevant groups of HRD professionals. An important cooperative of professionals is NVO2: the Dutch association of HRD-professionals. As to the quality of educational activities more than 50% of all companies carried out some kind of evaluation of programmes. Usually this was done in the form of asking the opinion of the participants of courses. A part of the companies also looked at the effects of the interventions: improvement of knowledge among employees (44% of the companies), change in working behaviour and performance (60%), or surplus value (e.g. lower costs) (34%) (Claessen & Nieuweboer, 2007).

Sources

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<http://www.cbs.nl>

COLO (Common Body of Expertise Centres for Vocational Education and Business)

<http://www.colo.nl>

Eurostat

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