

The struggle of innovating VET from a Dutch point of view¹

KURZFASSUNG: Im vorliegenden Beitrag werden zunächst die zentralen niederländischen Reformentwicklungen im Bereich der Berufsbildung der letzten zehn Jahre skizziert. Den Argumenten und Maßnahmen der Modernisierung werden Annahmen zur praktischen Wirksamkeit gegenübergestellt. Der Autor identifiziert typische Dilemmata, deren Klärung angemahnt wird, um auch in Zukunft eine erfolgreiche Entwicklung der Berufsbildung in den Niederlanden verzeichnen zu können. Eine Niederländische „Berufspädagogik“ könnte hierzu einen wesentlichen Beitrag leisten.

ABSTRACT: In this article the topics of modernisation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the Netherlands were outlined, particularly to the most important changes in the last ten years. This VET-policy is confronted with some questions („dilemmas“) about functioning in practise. Finally it is argued for a „VET-directed pedagogic“ which is supposed to be in the position of being able to understand learning processes in VET from a pedagogical and didactical point of view.

1. Introduction

As a contribution to the symposium from a Dutch point of view this paper offers a sketch of some mainlines in the development of the innovation of the VET-system in the Netherlands, with special attention to dilemma's in and perspectives of the transformationprocess towards reforming the system.

To understand the Dutch situation quite well I present first of all some main features of the Dutch VET-system as it rather recently has developed, especially focusing at secondary vocational education and training (chapter 2). Secondly, I sketch the main institutional layers of the VET-system (chapter 3). Thirdly main challenges and dilemma's from functioning in practice are mentioned (chapter 4). Lastly, some conclusions are formulated on the actual position of VET in the Netherlands, including perspectives of the innovation process (chapter 5).

2. Towards a reform of the VET-system

During the sixties and seventies of the 20th century VET was not an important issue on the political agenda in the Netherlands. The discussion at that time – both in politics and research – was concentrating on structural reforms in general secondary education and the role of schools. As a consequence – also because of historical reasons – pedagogics on vocational education and training (‘Berufspädagogik’) has been strongly underdeveloped in the Netherlands and so was research in this field. In the eighties of the past century a strong re-orientation in the political agenda took place. Emphasis was shifting towards matching-problems between vocational education and labour market, in the beginning defined from a

1 Contribution to the Symposium ‘Entgrenzung der beruflichen Bildung-Bildung über die Lebenszeit’, Zürich, 23-03-2004.

socio-economic point of view and later on also combined with socio-integrative points of view. According to this the existing VET-system got more attention in policy-making processes.

From the beginning discussions not only dealt with changes in the actual content of vocational education and training, but also with the question how trade and industry should shoulder their share of responsibility for VET. On the one hand, the role of trade and industry within the consultative and advisory structure towards VET-policies was under discussion, while on the other hand the influence of trade and industry on the organisation and contents of vocational training programmes was dealt with. From a political point of view VET was more and more stressed as an important pillar for revitalization of Dutch economy.

This re-orientation in policy making processes has been marked by reports of three rather influential advisory-committees for Dutch government: "The Wagner-Committee" (1983), the "Rauwenhoff-Committee" (1990) and the "Van Veen-Committee" (1993). These three committees were settled by government as independent advisory bodies – each of them chaired by a well known representative of the Dutch industry –, and have functioned as major crowbars in reforming policies.

A major point in their recommendations was that the involvement of social partners with VET should be strengthened by giving them a stronger position both in decision making structures on VET as well as by emphasizing the significance of (occupational) practice-components in the functioning of the VET-system.

Those recommendations were elaborated further. First of all by proposing a *re-arrangement of existing relationships* between the most important actors in VET, which should be *shaped in a more flexible way*. Each of the actors involved – vocational schools, local government, labour offices, and students – should get more autonomy in dealing with each other as well as with local industry. This has been the main argument for the restructuring and merging later on of existing vocational schools into big 'multifunctional' educational institutions with a relatively autonomous position, according to the community-college-model: regional vocational colleges (ROC's). The re-arrangement idea was broadly accepted by central government and social partners, be it that one did not agree with the idea that all relationships between actors in the VET-should be fully regionalised i. e. shaped at regional/local level. Instead government and (central) social partners concluded that there should remain *qualifications at national level to ensure labour market-mobility of (future) employees* nationwide, at least over the Netherlands and as much as possible also within Europe. This can be seen as a second elaboration of the recommendations by the advisory-committees, leading both to the launching of a national qualification-structure and to an important position for social partners at sectoral level both in constructing and defining qualifications.

Thirdly, the *'learning by working'*-principle was strongly emphasized as an important principle in the whole system, not only in the dual-based part of it². It was advised to guarantee that in the next future practice-places – also within the school

2 In the Netherlands the initial VET-system consisted at that time of two separate subsystems, parallel to each other: a school based one (mbo) and a work based one/apprenticeship (leerlingwezen). The school-based subsystem was far dominating, regarding both the number of pupils and its status.

based subsystem – should be realized with more commitment (namely by firms) as it in general was before, and shaped along various modes. Above all practice-places should explicitly contribute to attainment targets of VET as these were formulated in national qualifications.

Along with several policy papers by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the recommendations of the advisory-committees meant a fundamental re-orientation in Dutch policies towards VET. According to the proposed lines priority was given to a) optimizing the match between VET and developments on the labour market, and b) the striving towards a so called 'starting qualification' for everyone. Without doubt considerations from a government point of view regarding restructuring the rather diverse landscape of vocational training and adult education into more conveniently and less expensive arrangements played a major role too.

In the end the re-orientation in policies was formalized in the new legislation of 1995: *the Adult and Vocational Education Act (WEB)*. This legislation has offered a new institutional framework for the further development of VET.

In the new legislation the following *pickets for VET-policies* can be distinguished (HÖVELS, 1994):

- *A withholding role for the government and more involvement of social partners at central and at branch-level:* in order to give more influence and a greater responsibility to significant labour-market-parties.
- *Integration of the school-based track (mbo-bol) and the dual-based track (apprenticeship-bbl) in one harmonized VET-system, also within the same schools³:* to offer courses and learning routes in a more flexible way, depending on the requirements of the labour-market as well as on the abilities and willingness of students.
- *More autonomy to relevant actors at local level, namely educational institutions/schools, and the enhancement of their own policy-potentials:* in order to emphasize the responsiveness of educational institutions at local level and their responsibility to find a proper position in significant network-building i. e. the local infrastructure.
- *The guarantee of a minimum of practice-learning for all VET-pathways (with a minimum of 20 % for each course, including school-based tracks):* both to smooth the transition from school to work and to acquire qualifications and competences which can not or hardly be gained at school.
- *A uniform national qualification-structure, with global educational targets which are determined (together by social partners and the educational field) at central level and with some space for local actors to fill in:* in order to provide for qualifications with 'nation-wide' civil value and for more transparency in the supply of qualifications and courses. At the same time some ($\pm 20\%$) space is given to schools for specifications of courses-contents according to local and regional needs.

3 Including (general and basic) education for adults

3. Institutional layers of the new VET-system

The new Act is gradually implemented since January 1996. According to its main pickets as these are mentioned above, the new Dutch VET-system can be looked upon as a typical-Dutch mixture of components from the Anglo-Saxon (the concept of 'community colleges'), the Rhine-Country (the concept of occupations – 'Berufe' - as an important basis for national qualifications combined with the role played by social partners) and the French model (despite emphasizing dual elements, still an important role for both school-based education and the state). Before elaborating on how the system is functioning in practice as well as on its potentials to supply for responsiveness and innovation, we concentrate first of all on the main 'institutional layers' of the new VET-system.

As far as its vocational education and training components are concerned⁴ the new system is based on three main institutional layers: 1) the concentration of available courses in – about 45 – *Regional Vocational Colleges (ROC's)* all over the country, 2) a national *structure of qualifications* covering all vocational training programmes within the VET-system and 3) the creation of nearly twenty *National Bodies for Vocational Education (LOBs)*⁵ in which both education and trade and industry are represented and which have to play a central role in developing and maintaining the national structure of qualifications.

Regional colleges for vocational education and training as suppliers of learning processes

The first layer of the new legislative framework for vocational education is the concentration of the available courses in big educational institutions, the so called Regional Vocational Colleges (ROC's). In a ROC the old institutions for the various types of vocational education and adult education in a region are merged into one single administrative and organisational unit. These new institutions include colleges of intermediate vocational education (mbo's), schools for part-time instruction as part of the apprenticeship-training route (district schools), as well as schools for general adult education (basic adult education, part-time time/evening education etc.). These new institutions have got in a relatively great extent administrative and organizational autonomy in realising their targets. Those targets are focussed at leading as many as possible students to a diploma (with a national qualification as basis) or at least a recognized certificate (partial qualification), under the condition of no-entry-requirements for students. It is crucial to notice that schools are in principle fully autonomous in *how* to reach these targets. In other words, within certain preconditions (financial, quality-assurance, national qualifications) ROC's are free in the didactical-pedagogical shaping of educational and training processes (including modularisation, a flexible relationship between school- and dual based learning routes, validation of prior learning (APL) and handling various learning principles).

4 Other components concern general adult education, which is offered within ROC's too, be it with a strong role in financing by municipalities.

5 Since June 2002 these are called Knowledge Centres for VET and Industry (KBB's).

ROC's are considered to have a variety of advantages. Combining various types of education and expertise should make it easier than before to provide tailor-made programmes for specific groups of students, whereas this also could support efforts to offer training programmes which are more fitting with the wishes and needs of regional trade and industry. It is the intention, that the ROC's should become the 'spin in the web' of significant regional actors, for example by making common learning – arrangements with local trade and industry as well as by functioning as a knowledge-centre at local level. To be financed by government ROC's are supposed to direct their regular courses and curricula largely (80 %) at qualifications as these are defined at national level.

Further on by law opportunities are offered to ROC's to offer training courses on the 'free market' – so called contract activities –, enabling them both to make profits and to strengthen ties with the local trade and industry.

It has to be noticed that ROC's have organized themselves at national level in an umbrella-organization (Bve-Raad), both to meet the requirements they have to play (in common responsibility with social partners, at the platform of the national bodies) at sectoral level in shaping national qualifications and to organize more in general the interests of the educational field.

National qualification structure as supplier of learning targets

The second institutional layer is the *national structure of qualifications*, which consists of the structure and profile of all (initial) "qualifications" for which secondary vocational education ('Erstausbildung') should prepare. These qualifications – in other words, occupational entities for which vocational training is required ('Ausbildungsberufe') – are organised both on the basis of occupations or *occupational areas* to which they are related and the *level of occupational practice* which they aim for. Within the qualification structure different levels of qualifications are distinguished: assistant, basic skilled worker, professional worker and middle management. The core elements of the qualification structure are both qualifications and learning targets as these are laid down per qualification. The national qualification structure offers the legal framework of VET-contents within which educational institutions have to operate.

The qualification structure is intended to be an effective instrument of communication between education and labour-market. Both the demands of trade and industry, and of schools and the society as a whole on graduating in secondary vocational education should be clearly stated, and the striving is towards transparency of the structure.

The state offers a global frame of criteria according to which LOB's (see below) should develop and hold up-to-date national qualifications. The main principle of this global frame is called "*selective flexibility*". This concept refers to the striving for broad, lasting and future-oriented vocational qualifications which enable graduates to be flexible on the labour-market.

An important requirement of the qualification structure is the so-called *triple qualification*. Qualifications have to include a threefold content. Programmes therefore not only have to provide students with the necessary professional skills for entering the labour market. They also have to create the base for further education and training and to equip participants with social and cultural skills

needed to function as a member of both the social organization of companies and of society as a whole.

Further on most qualifications are structured in partial qualifications. Accomplishing a single partial qualification means that students get a certificate, accomplishing all partial qualifications means a diploma. Modules in training programmes are often structured on the basis of partial qualifications. However, this is not necessary the case because modularisation is a feature of how to shape learning-processes, while partial qualifications are a feature of how to structure qualifications in a (for labour market and/or society) meaningful way.

National bodies for vocational education and training as determinators of the targets

Another key element in the whole institutional framework is the process of determining qualifications and educational goals. The basic idea behind the national qualification structure is rather simple and does imply commitment of all relevant parties in the field. Following the 'royal way', social partners of each sector are responsible for the construction of occupational profiles while social partners together with the educational field (a shared responsibility!) translate these occupational profiles into qualification profiles, that is to say into (partial) qualifications and attainment targets. The 'shared responsibility' in the system is formally expressed in national bodies (organized pro occupational area or pro branche), in which representatives of social partners and of the educational field meet and decide on defining qualifications and filling up them with attainment targets. These *national bodies for vocational education and training* (LOB's) are the third institutional layer of the whole system⁶. At the end – as mentioned before – educational institutions (ROC's) are responsible for the pedagogical-didactical shaping of the educational process, if possible in close cooperation with relevant other (local) actors, namely trade and industry.

LOB's have organized themselves at national level in an own umbrella-organization (COLO), in order to coordinate activities of the various LOB's as well as to take care of their common interests.

4. The functioning in practice: some main challenges and dilemma's

The Dutch VET-system is supposed to function according to the principle of 'joint responsibility' by state, educational field and trade and industry.

The whole structure seems to fit well within the neo-corporatistic tradition in the Netherlands. The state creates frameworks, but within those frameworks it encourages parties involved to adopt self-regulation. The system can be looked at as an effort to incorporate elements of decentralisation and "customer-oriented thinking" into an institutional framework which is largely settled at national level. The national qualification structure seems to be the expression of it – at least as far as

6 Above all these bodies have the legal task to care for sufficient practice-places as well as to care for the quality of practices places.

contents of VET are involved –. Within this framework educational institutions are supposed to function relatively autonomous to supply for tailor-made flexible learning pathways, whereby both school- and dual based training-programmes can be offered. As mentioned before, the Dutch VET-system looks like a typical Dutch mixture of Anglo-Saxon-, Rhine-Country-, and French components.

A crucial question of course is how the whole system is *functioning in practice*, especially regarding the main principle of *selective flexibility*. Selective flexibility means the generally underlined striving for *broad occupational qualifications* which are *durable*, *lasting* and which are directed to *the future*. Students in VET should be prepared both for individual *flexibility*, not only at internal labour markets but above all at external labour markets and for a *life long learning*. Above all another important principle is stressed: the principle of *accessibility* of the VET-system for students be it with or without a diploma of lower secondary education, striving for a starting qualification (at least a qualification at level 2) 'for everyone' and diminishing the rate of early school leaving.

Nowadays there is serious doubt about reaching these goals by means of the existing system. At least a broad consensus seems to develop both about the *rigidity* of the national qualification structure because of limitations it is setting for educational institutions in the shaping of learning processes, and about the *in-transparency* of the structure. At the same time suppliers of learning processes are developing new (pedagogical-didactical) learning concepts which are required both by 'the turn into competences' and offering customized learning routes for everyone.

As a consequence first of all both the character and functioning of the national qualification structure nowadays are strongly under pressure, leading to proposals on how to strengthen the national qualification structure. The striving is to make it more competence-based, building broader qualifications, diminishing their number and guaranteeing more transparency. However, a lot of bottlenecks are arising, among others in terms of the tension between broadness and recognisability of qualifications.

Secondly, pedagogical-didactical concepts are drastically changing, whereby both 'natural learning' and 'competence-learning' are key-concepts and teaching-/learning are restructured a.o. by efforts to incorporate all kinds of combinations of learning in practice and at school (eg. GEURTS, 2002). However, in these efforts a lot of bottlenecks are arising too, among others due to the innovative potential by schools, their management and teachers vis à vis their relationship with local trade and industry.

Above all some *main challenges or dilemma's are in discussion*, as these appear from nowadays practice in the Netherlands. We'll summarize four of them:

1. How to guarantee an optimum balance between qualifications at national level at the one hand and at regional/local level at the other. This refers to tensions between the need for qualifications which are nationwide, broadly defined and at the same time recognisable enough for the actors involved (the *national-local*-dilemma). To handle this dilemma a stronger cooperation between LOB's and ROC's is stimulated going hand in hand with pleas for more space for ROC's and more globally formulated qualifications.
2. How to guarantee an optimum tuning between qualifications as these are defined separately for different branches. This refers to existing tensions be-

tween the structuring of LOB's pro branch at the one hand and dynamics of the labour market where new kinds of employment and competencies are generated right across various branches and their institutions at the other. Above all this points to the need to avoid overlap of qualifications within and between LOB's (the *branch bound-breaking-dilemma*). Some initiatives are existing to flexibilise the institutional substrate for a competence-based qualificationstructure (KRAAYVANGER e. a., 2002; HÖVELS, 2003). Meanwhile a central coordination-point (within Colo) is established to stimulate coordination and more openness between LOB's.

3. How to guarantee a valid tuning in the total process from defining occupational profiles at national level, via qualifications and attainment targets towards learning processes in vocational schools and within firms, without being biased by the various behaviours and interests of institutions which are operative during this process (the *linear-interactive-dilemma*). It is tried to optimize the functioning of self regulating system of actors involved, whereby strong emphasis is laid on interactive elements in the relationship between the various 'partners in the chain'.
4. Last but not least, an important issue for discussion nowadays in the Netherlands is about the old issue of the ownership of the VET-system: how to find an optimum balance between influences by social partners and the educational field (*the power-dilemma*). Evidently, although interests of various parties differ, strivings are directed at a (re-)vitalisation of the traditional neo-corporatist tradition i. e. the Dutch 'poldermodel' in the VET-area. Of course commitment both by students and trade and industry is a crucial issue, and schools will have to deal with both of them.

5. Conclusions

Analysing consequences from a point of view of responsiveness of VET-systems of key-developments in society towards a "knowledge-society" (cfr. e. g. SCHNABEL, 2000)⁷, it could be stated that those developments do emphasize at least three options.

In my point of view the first option is the need for more integrative and network-concepts in shaping VET-systems, instead of traditional planning-concepts wherein working and learning are seen as disconnected entities. Particularly towards the contents this would mean that *interactive principles* should be stressed more than linearity-principles in determinating the character and contents of qualifications.

A second important option is to incorporate sufficient space for constructivist approaches of learning processes whereby the concept of competences can be realised. Particularly towards a national qualification structure it implies *global competence-based standards* as the basis of qualifications.

Thirdly, the relevance should be stressed of an appropriate balance between top-down i. c. centralistic and bottom-up i. c. decentral approaches. This would

7 SCHNABEL (director of the Social and Cultural Planning Office in the Netherlands) recently distinguished from a sociological point of view key developments in society under the heading of five big I's: internationalisation, individualization, informalization, informatization and intensification (SCHNABEL, 2000).

imply the need for adequate communication between the world of *the real work* and *the real learning*, with a specific focus at significant innovations in both worlds.

As mentioned before, in the Netherlands it is proposed to strengthen the national qualification structure – being one of the institutional layers of the VET-system – by making it more competence-based. In my point of view this is in principle a good direction to arrive at more responsiveness of the VET-system as a whole vis à vis key-developments in our society. However, much will depend on how this will be elaborated in the character and contents of a renewed structure. Accordingly to what I mentioned already, the success of innovating the system will largely depend on stressing interactive principles, defining global standards and keeping in contact with the reality of work and learning. The challenge for schools is to develop and offer appropriate pedagogic-didactical learning ways, not on their own but in close cooperation with trade and industry.

As a consequence first of all *institutional barriers* should be demolished, both between the various national bodies and between institutions at national and regional level. In my point of view the functioning of existing institutions is still to much lead by their own institutional positions and interests without a dominating focus at taking real shared responsibility for a responsive VET-system. I would call this the *relational side of the medallion*.

Secondly, the *concept of competence* should be handled and elaborated in an appropriate way, focussing at its linking pin – function between the individual, learning processes and the labour market. In my point of view many of the elaborations nowadays are based on a rather small and simplified interpretation of the concept, neglecting too often its main characteristics: integrative, holistic-individual-oriented, action-oriented and dynamic. It would call this the *content-side of the same medallion*.

Overcoming both relational and content-barriers in the further reform of the VET-system, would require at least support by a VET-directed pedagogic ('Berufspädagogik'). In my point of view a strong research tradition in this area is lacking in the Netherlands. In this respect we could perhaps learn from the German tradition (cfr. KRAAYVANGER en HÖVELS, 2001). However, according to the German tradition one of the main issues which remain is how to handle concepts like 'Beruf' and 'Beruflichkeit' vis à vis both key-developments towards a "knowledge-society" and reforming policies towards VET. And, it is for sure that the typical Dutch history of a trade-nation as well as the search for balancing between Anglo-Saxon-, Rhine-country-, and French-components will be both a complicating and a challenging factor.

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