

# Utilising student and alumni data to support quality assurance at system, institutional and educational level

July 2019

## Background

This memorandum was drawn up by the National Coordination Point EQAVET (NCP EQAVET). It presents a picture of the way in which student and alumni data are collected and utilised to support quality assurance in senior secondary vocational education and training (VET) in the Netherlands. The data are important for the continuous improvement of educational quality and study choice information for prospective students. This memorandum discusses the system, institutional and educational level and is available in both Dutch and English. In this memorandum, alumni should be taken to mean former students, in other words everyone who has left a study programme or VET college, with or without a diploma.

The NCP EQAVET fulfils a role with a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in strengthening quality assurance in the VET sector both in the Netherlands and in Europe. The utilisation of alumni data to support quality assurance at the institutional and educational level is high up on the agenda of the European EQAVET network. In addition, the NCP EQAVET has developed various activities in the Netherlands in recent years themed around strengthening the quality culture. This includes looking at ways of more effectively utilising the data available at team level.

The purpose of this publication is twofold: 1) to provide insight into the state of affairs at VET colleges regarding the collection and use of alumni data and 2) to raise issues, in the context of collecting alumni data, which still require further elaboration. The legislation, policy and surveys consulted and the interviews conducted with quality insurance staff at VET colleges constitute the basis of this publication.

## Theoretical framework

VET colleges conduct surveys among students and alumni on the quality of the education they provide. The colleges want to obtain insight into the extent to which education is aligned to professional practice and to further education, and how to improve education. Due to the VET sector's ambitions on the lifelong learning agenda and the further development of quality assurance, many VET colleges are updating their policies and developing activities in order to share and exchange knowledge in this area.

Collecting data on the quality of education has been transposed into legislation. VET colleges are required to provide effective learning pathways that are closely aligned to labour market needs and to further education, and to ensure that the curriculum is of good quality and well organised (Adult

and Vocational Education Act (*Wet Educatie Beroepsonderwijs*, hereinafter 'WEB') Sections 1.3.5 and 7.4.8). VET colleges have a duty of care to ensure that prospective participants are informed so as to *'enable them to compare programme options and to choose a suitable programme, as well as make a good judgement on the content and organisation of the study programme they wish to pursue and the examinations, and to enable them to prepare properly for the requirements imposed.'* (WEB Section 6.3.1).

The WEB lays down that external experts and stakeholders are required to be involved in the assessment of educational quality. Against this background, students and alumni are an important survey target audience. This is set out as follows in WEB Section 1.3.6:

*'The competent authority will design a quality assurance system for the institution and in this regard will ensure, working in association with other institutions as much as possible, that a regular assessment of the quality of education is provided for, including measures and instruments to ensure that staff maintain their competence. The assessment at the institutions will also be based on participants' opinion of the quality of education provided by the institution. The competent authority will ensure that independent experts and stakeholders are involved in the assessment referred to in the first sentence. The results of the assessment are public information.'* (WEB Section 1.3.6).

The role of the Education Inspectorate in the VET sector entails monitoring the quality of education, financial management and compliance with the legal requirements by the educational institutions. The Inspectorate conducts an inspection of VET colleges once every four years. The Inspectorate uses the 2017 Inspection Framework for VET for this purpose. The quality area 'Educational outcomes' includes the aspect 'Further success' with the indicator 'transition to further education' (percentage of students who transition to further education) and an indicator for 'job within time frame/alignment to labour market'<sup>1</sup> (job found that matches the educational level within a reasonable period). These indicators relate to alumni and will be further developed in collaboration with the education sector before being included in the assessment.

## **Purposes of collecting and utilising student and alumni data**

Collecting student and alumni data offers the opportunity to implement the principle that primarily VET colleges themselves should assess (at educational and institutional level) the quality of the education they provide, with the involvement of experts and stakeholders. This will additionally enable them to gain insight into the transition rate to further education as well as into labour market developments, and to determine whether the study programmes are aligned to the labour market (system level).

Student and alumni data are collected for various purposes. We have provided a breakdown of the purposes at educational and institutional level as well as at system level below.

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<sup>1</sup> The quality criterion 'further success' is included in the Inspectorate's Inspection Framework and consultations are currently taking place with the education sector on further defining it.

*At educational and institutional level:*

- to monitor alumni satisfaction with the programme pursued so that specific improvements can be made (including the quality of study choice information);
- to monitor the reasons for the drop-out rate and factors that the programme or VET college can influence;
- to monitor the extent to which alumni have found a job following on from their study programme, or in the same sector;
- to maintain contact with alumni so that they remain involved in the study programme and can play a role in it, by offering work placements and hybrid teaching or guest teaching opportunities;
- to maintain contact with alumni as potential customers of education and to obtain insight into alumni needs for retraining and further training;
- so alumni can serve as ambassadors for a study programme or college, which is conducive to the image of the study programme or college;
- to promote a quality culture in which feedback is a key indicator for teams to work together on the quality of education (EQAVET, 2018).

*At system level:*

- to obtain insight into the extent to which the study programme has prepared alumni for the professional field or further education;
- to monitor the reasons underlying the drop-out rate, in particular to obtain insight into factors that can be influenced by the study programme/VET college;
- to obtain insight into the extent to which alumni have found a job following on from their study programme or in the same sector;
- to obtain insight into whether the study programme is sufficiently aligned to labour market needs, the needs of society and the need for further education;
- to obtain insight into the need for training among alumni, while at the same time monitoring developments in the professional field.

The Inspection Framework of the Education Inspectorate has identified a number of quality areas and quality standards for the VET sector. Feedback from alumni on the educational process, examination and certification can provide valuable information at institutional and educational level. This includes the level of satisfaction with the curriculum, teachers' teaching strategies, the administration of examinations, safety and the learning environment in the VET college. Added to that, feedback on the study success and further success of alumni themselves can provide valuable information at educational, institutional and system level: to what extent is the study programme aligned to the labour market and to what extent do we as a college offer labour market-relevant study programmes? Study programmes must have insight into the destination of alumni. This is shown in Figure 1.

The EQAVET reference framework was drawn up in a European context. It is used to promote transparency in the European Members States' quality insurance systems. One of the components in the EQAVET reference framework focuses on alumni data (at system level): where do students end up one to three years after completing their study programme (work, further education or

otherwise), do students have a job one year after completing their study programme and are they using the skills acquired during the programme?

This is included in the Inspectorate's Inspection Framework as 'employment prospects' and 'further success'. 'Employment prospects' refers to: finding a job within a reasonable period, matching the level of the programme completed. This is currently determined beforehand based on information from the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB). How large is the job market for the particular programme in the region where it is offered? The indicator 'further success', which has yet to be developed, examines, among other aspects, the extent to which the forecast job prospects have actually materialised.

Figure 1. Criterion OR3 in the Inspection Framework<sup>2</sup>

<p><b>OR3. Further success</b></p> <p>The student's destination after leaving the study programme is known and at least meets the expectations of the programme.</p>
<p><b>Basic quality</b></p> <p>The institution has knowledge of developments on the labour market (regional or otherwise). It possesses data on the further careers of students who have left the study programme either prematurely or with a diploma. This includes the transition to further education, a job or an appropriate further programme for students with special education needs. The further success at least meets the expectations in relation to the average national results of similar study programmes and the situation on the regional labour market.</p>
<p><b>Own quality aspects</b></p> <p>There is a supplementary policy on the further success and how it will be achieved.</p>

## Survey on the use of data by colleges

A survey by Oberon and KBA (2015) shows that, in general, institutions carefully consider the priorities they set for quality assurance and that departments within the educational institutions focus on data that provide insight into the extent to which they have achieved their targets. Apart from data on revenues and returns, numerous other data are used at institutional level, such as satisfaction surveys, inspection reports, assessments, questionnaires for the purpose of the interview cycle, absenteeism data and so on. The 2017 and 2018 Education Reports issued by the Inspectorate additionally show that many VET colleges have difficulty in translating the information derived from quality systems and evaluations into actions that lead to improving the quality of education. Moreover, the VET sector places a relatively strong focus on study success, satisfaction and examinations and focuses less on the primary processes, such as lesson and teacher evaluations by students and lesson observations by supervisors or colleagues.

Even though data from institutions and programmes can provide insight into strengths and weaknesses, a number of obstacles impede the use of data for quality purposes, according to the survey by Oberon and KBA (2015):

<sup>2</sup> This criterion is still being developed and is not yet included in the assessment.

- There is a fine balance between not overloading teams with information and providing them with sufficient information.
- Teachers perceive their workload as high and consequently barely have any time to evaluate their workload and think about quality improvements or to observe lessons.
- All the necessary information is not always collected at one location.
- Supervision by the Inspectorate is regarded as a bottleneck. According to the colleges surveyed, too much focus is placed on cognitive results, while the story behind the figures remains virtually untold.

The recommendations arising from Oberon's survey are therefore as follows:

- promoting a quality and improvement culture;
- investing in the analytical ability of staff;
- accessing alumni data based on a genuine interest in finding out how they are faring in further education or on the labour market;
- structuring the exchange of knowledge and experiences with regard to the use of data for quality improvements.

## **Student and alumni surveys**

### *VET student JOB monitor*

Alumni can provide information on the quality of the study programme, as can current students. One of the most frequently used questionnaires in the Netherlands is the JOB monitor, a student satisfaction survey in which a large number of Dutch students participate. The JOB is the association of students in senior secondary vocational education. The survey provides colleges with strategic information, since they can mirror their own performance against that of peer colleges and the total sector.

### *ROA and CBS alumni survey*

In the Netherlands, data on where students end up one to three years after their study programme (work, further education or otherwise), whether students have a job one year after completing their programme and whether they use the skills they have acquired in their work are analysed by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS), based on the School-Leavers Survey. This large-scale survey monitors recent school leavers and recent graduates. The survey focuses on the transition from school to work or further education and therefore meets the requirement at system, institutional and educational level. National data on each study programme are available via the ROA school-leavers information system. Statistics Netherlands also publishes figures specifically on labour market alignment at institutional level (on account of obligations under the Macroeconomic Efficiency Act (*Wet Macroeconomische Doelmatigheid*)). This information is supplementary to registered data on the labour market, which is also published by Statistics Netherlands. These two sources therefore provide a complete picture of the alignment of VET programmes to the labour market, nationally, regionally and by VET college. To obtain a picture of the regional labour market, SBB (Foundation for Cooperation between Vocational Education,

Training and the Labour Market) also publishes information on each programme (for example, *Kans op werk* ('Job Outlook')).

The Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad) publishes relevant data on *Mbo-transparant* ([www.mbotransparant.nl](http://www.mbotransparant.nl)).

In addition, Statistics Netherlands publishes job data on VET graduates based on registered data. These statistics contain all graduates and the information has also been broken down at institutional and educational level (CBS, 2018). A pilot project was carried out together with regional education and training centre ROC van Amsterdam, the Education Executive Agency (DUO) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, aimed at making these statistics available at team level as well.

#### *Alumni survey pilot by the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges*

Furthermore, the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges is carrying out the Alumni Survey pilot, which will form part of the VET Benchmark (*Benchmark MBO*) upon completion of the development phase. The survey focuses on improving study programme quality, promoting lifelong learning, enabling teaching teams to keep track of developments in professional practice and linking alumni to the programme (willing to give lessons as a guest teacher or provide work placements). The results of the questionnaire will be presented at institutional level as well as at location or team level. According to the researchers, the survey will focus on personal development for alumni. It is up to the VET colleges to determine how they will utilise the data at institutional and educational level in order to improve quality. The survey will be conducted among alumni two years after graduation.

#### *Tracktion project*

The purpose of the collaborative project Tracktion, which is being conducted under the Erasmus+ programme, is to keep in touch with alumni after they have completed their study programme. It also aims to strengthen vocational education and training. This project is being carried out by collaborating organisations in Spain, Estonia, Italy, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Alfa College in the Netherlands is involved in the project. The project will result in a protocol to enable alumni to be tracked and in a 'guide' to foster and maintain successful alumni relations programmes in the VET sector.

### **Four practical examples: the utilisation of data by government-funded and non-government funded VET colleges**

Two colleges participating in the alumni data pilot survey initiated by the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges were interviewed for the purpose of this memorandum (SintLucas and Noorderpoort). Two non-government funded VET colleges were also interviewed (Fotovakschool and PROFIT Opleidingen) about their policy on collecting student and alumni data. Jos de Jonge, who is conducting the above survey, was also interviewed. The central question asked in the interviews with the colleges was: how do VET colleges and study programmes collect and utilise student and alumni data to support quality assurance?

Inge Tempel, policy adviser at Noorderpoort explains: *'Our institution participates in the JOB survey. Panel discussions are held with students at the colleges and quality audits begin by interviewing students. The objective is to gauge students' opinions on the quality of education.'* Quantitative data from the JOB Monitor are placed in an online environment, so that staff across the whole organisation can view and use the data. Student career counsellors discuss the results of the JOB Monitor in class.

Quality assurance staff support the teaching teams, including by performing quantitative analyses of the survey results to identify what is going well and what is going less well. The teams use these results to take action. This might be included in the team ambition plan, which teams draw up for a four-year period. An activity plan is also drawn up each year, in which these data are used.

Noorderpoort participated in the second round of the alumni survey. Noorderpoort has set itself a target of obtaining 80% of the alumni data. Inge Tempel says: *'We would like to interview alumni about how they have experienced the study programmes and verify with them whether the content of the study programme aligns to requirements in professional practice. We would also like to maintain contact with alumni to ask whether they would be interested in providing lessons as a guest teacher, for example, and to provide them with retraining or further training as part of lifelong learning.'*

Noorderpoort regards surveying alumni as complementary to the quality cycle, which also means that other stakeholders will be surveyed as well, such as students, employees and work placement companies. *'The teaching teams have received fact sheets containing the results of the alumni survey. They can use the results to improve educational quality and to carry out alumni activities at the colleges.'*

Karin Dekkers, quality assurance adviser at SintLucas Professional College, says that students are surveyed by the JOB Monitor every other year, and that the college holds a student consultation in the interim year. SintLucas maintains close contact with alumni. Alumni are surveyed after one year, three years and five years. In addition to this survey, SintLucas also participates in the survey conducted by the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges. Apart from these questionnaires, the college also works on strengthening alumni relations. Gatherings are organised, such as network meetings and a large garden party for alumni and current students, aimed at networking and maintaining ties with SintLucas, under the motto: *'Eens een Sint, altijd een Sint'* ('Once a Saint, always a Saint'). SintLucas College is currently focusing on setting up further training programmes based on an alumni needs survey.

Other VET colleges should learn the lesson from SintLucas that the shop floor should be involved. *'The data collected from surveys should be provided to the teams, because they work with the students. We're a small college, and that makes it easier',* says Karin.

Two non-government funded VET colleges were also asked how they organise this. Monique de Rijke, head of Quality Assurance at NAVB, the Dutch Academy for Image Creation, says that the study programme uses data on and the experiences of students, alumni, lecturers and work placement organisations to optimise education.

Each study programme has a programme committee, in which students and lecturers discuss twice a year what is going well and what is not going well. Furthermore, module evaluations are conducted among students and lecturers at the end of each period, focusing on the curriculum, testing and assessment, teaching methods and facilities, and students and work placement organisations are surveyed during work placements. The results are used by management, the curriculum committee, the examinations board and facility management to make improvements. The NAVB has an alumni association called Fotolumni for graduates of the Photography Faculty (Fotovakschool). The alumni association is important for maintaining contacts and for enabling professionals who mostly work independently to share their experiences. It organises workshops and occasionally lectures for its members and NAVB students, and maintains contact with Fotovakschool. Alumni may use the college's facilities. The NAVB and Fotolumni are actively engaged in finding ways of strengthening mutual relations and collaboration with external parties. The Dutch Filmmakers Academy (Audiovisual Media Faculty) is in the process of setting up an alumni association.

The NAVB holds a survey among graduates, including members of Fotolumni, every two years. The NAVB primarily wants to know what alumni's retrospective views are of the study programme, what aspects were missing, whether they work in the profession or where they are currently working, and what their further training needs are.

Monique de Rijke, head of Quality Assurance at Fotovakschool, says that the college conducts module evaluations, and students and work placement organisations are surveyed as well as alumni. It also has an alumni organisation that organises lectures and maintains contact with Fotovakschool. Alumni are still allowed to use the college's workspaces. Fotovakschool primarily wants to know what alumni's retrospective views are of the study programme, what aspects were missing, whether they work in the profession or where they are currently working, and what their further training needs are.

Ruth Koger is deputy principle at PROFIT Opleidingen. This private training institute believes it is essential to enter into a dialogue with students. Conducting such a dialogue is in the organisation's cultural DNA. The main reason is that students are also the institute's customers. PROFIT feels it has a duty to ensure that they are satisfied and that the educational quality is good, so that a diploma will actually be of value. To that end, the institute evaluates modules every six months. It also holds surveys so that students can assess the education, the lecturers and the combination of theory and practice in the study programme. Mentors also hold discussions in class, at least after each phase of the study programme. The lecturers provide feedback to the head office. One example is the feedback from students stating that they were unhappy with the examination assignments because they had to write a report each time. They now only write one report in which various assignments are linked. The vast majority of lecturers who teach the study programme are coaches. They are skilled at conducting these types of discussions and intuitively know what is going on in a group. 'After the final assessment of course assignments, we hold another evaluation meeting. Students have the opportunity to voice their opinions and we can learn from their feedback as a training institute.' Ruth is working on developing the alumni policy. Contact with alumni is currently maintained primarily by lecturers or others at the VET college who individually



keep in touch with alumni. Student trainees are placed at work placement companies. Following a survey in which alumni were involved, Ruth found that alumni enjoy contributing their ideas.

On behalf of PROFIT, Ruth Koger has expressed the desire to expand the participation of non-government funded VET colleges in certain surveys and to make instruments available in order to utilise and strengthen alumni relations. Ruth also has a message for private training institutes. She says that there is a notion that every institute should be able to work independently; however, 'in the end, we're all working on one and the same thing and should not all need to invent the same wheel.'

## **General Data Protection Regulation**

In order to approach alumni, colleges need data from alumni, which can be traced back to a specific person, such as names and email addresses. With the entry into force of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, colleges are required to establish new data processing procedures. The Netherlands Association of VET Colleges proposes that VET colleges incorporate the following key principles into their business operations:

1. The processing of personal data should be based on a predetermined purpose and only where strictly necessary to achieve that purpose.
2. Processing should have one of the legal bases as summarised in the GDPR (such as: permission from the student or to perform the education agreement).
3. The VET college must provide adequate safeguards for personal data.

Processing is broadly defined in this context and is a catch-all term for all operations that can be carried out with personal data, ranging from collection, use and retention to destruction.

A number of the colleges that were approached to provide information for this memorandum stated that they are still looking at what this legislation means for alumni surveys and activities, while other colleges have made more progress in this area. Colleges ask for students' private email addresses at the end of the study programme. Students are asked whether the college is permitted to use their email address for research purposes, or to keep them updated on developments at the college. Requesting permission from students is an additional requirement implemented upon the entry into force of the GDPR. The bottlenecks identified in this regard are how the answers can be managed and the degree of certainty as to whether permission is requested for the correct topics. Another college involves the data protection officer in concluding the processing agreement with the research agency. Furthermore, the basis for approaching alumni lies in the legitimate interest, which is to improve educational quality and the alignment of study programmes to labour market needs. This VET college is developing a college-wide policy stipulating how the organisation will deal with surveys and the use of data from current and former students and employees for this purpose under the GDPR. One of the colleges stated that this is an issue that must be addressed in order to be able to conduct alumni surveys.

The obstacles encountered are associated with a lack of clarity on data collection and management. The most important questions in this regard are: what is permitted? For what purposes is permission requested? How can we organise the use of data for these purposes? The solutions the

VET colleges have in mind are: 1) drawing up policy on the use of data from current and former students and 2) involving the VET college's data protection officer.

## Conclusion

The information described above shows that VET colleges are finding the data and surveys on the experiences of students and alumni increasingly useful. The collection and use of data is a current issue and colleges are now working on developing their approach. The colleges are currently already carrying out the following activities:

- An alumni survey will form part of the VET Benchmark by the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges upon completion of the development phase.
- Quantitative data will be placed in an online environment for teams or team managers. This will enable employees to view and use the data and they will become the data owner.
- Data will be translated into results and will be used in team plans as an improvement indicator.
- Investments will be made in alumni relations, in order to set up further training activities based on alumni needs, for example.
- Based on lecturers' individual relations with alumni, student trainees will be placed at work placement companies.

Some colleges have made more progress on this than others and their approaches also differ. Colleges do not know that much about each other's approaches. This follows from the results of the preparatory work on which this memorandum is based. The non-government funded VET colleges have also expressed the wish to be more open and to learn from each other

A number of issues have emerged from this analysis that still need to be further elaborated. For example, data are collected, but it is not clear to all parties what the data are used for, and teams do not always have access to the data themselves. In addition, not all VET colleges are aware of the available national and regional data they may use. Moreover, consideration should be given to involving VET colleges more closely in the survey itself. Furthermore, alumni policy at some VET colleges is limited to informal contact only. In this case, there are no official data, even though these two different types of data can in fact complement each other.

Another issue is the two alumni/school-leavers surveys (the School-Leavers Survey and the Alumni Survey pilot), in which alumni and school leavers are both surveyed. The CBS/ROA School-Leavers Survey is held well over a year after graduation and the Alumni Survey of the Netherlands Association of VET colleges is held two years after graduation. This creates the risk of school leavers and alumni being surveyed twice, which will put the response under pressure.

Furthermore, although alumni policy is being developed, more information can be shared while learning more from each other. Where to start with alumni policy and an alumni network, and what are good examples and lessons learned? How do you ensure that you save the private email addresses of students who are due to graduate, in accordance with privacy legislation? Colleges are grappling with these questions when it comes to alumni policy. It remains important to provide the data to the teaching teams. During the discussions with colleges, the small colleges stated that they can easily organise this.

## **Follow-up**

Based on its role in strengthening quality assurance in the VET sector in the Netherlands, NCP EQAVET will continue to focus on this theme and will take appropriate follow-up action in consultation with the members of the EQAVET Advisory Group.

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