

**A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS
Outcomes Study Visit November 2019**

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Date	March 2020
Project	NRP EQAVET



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Introduction

In November 2019 people from different European countries visited the Netherlands for an EQAVET study visit. The study visit is part of a close collaboration between the EU members Netherlands, Sweden and Romania. In the three countries, study visits will be organised. In every study visit specific questions or topics based on the need of the organising country will be discussed. All the visitors of the study visits are experts on quality assurance in Vocational Education (VET). Among the attending parties were people from the ministry, public and private VET organisations, experts on quality assurance in VET and teachers. In this study visit experts from the following countries joined: Croatia, Estonia, Ireland, Sweden, Romania, Slovenia, Austria, Finland and the Netherlands.

The main goals of the study visit were:

- 1 Constructive and critical reflection on the Dutch system
- 2 Exchange on quality assurance
- 3 Working towards an advice on strengthening quality assurance

During the study visit the Netherlands asked the attendants to review it's system of quality assurance and provide it with feedback. In order to do this a program was set up in which several topics were presented and explicated and group discussions on different topics took place. This helped the members of the network to get a good idea of the Dutch system of quality assurance and the reasons why different choices were made in the past. Also, every attendant received a background paper on the Dutch quality system in VET and information on the different systems of quality assurance in the other (partaking) European countries.

Attendants reviewed the Dutch system for their own personal professional framework on quality assurance.

One of the extra benefits of this set up is that the attendants had the chance to share their experiences, systems and opinions as well. Everyone had the opportunity to exchange information.

In this report a summary of the outcomes of the study visit will be given, as well as some specific (creative) products from the study visit.

1 Topics

As mentioned in the introduction, the main goals of the study visit were:

1. Constructive and critical reflection on the Dutch system
2. Exchange on quality assurance
3. Working towards an advice on strengthening quality assurance

The topics within the program which were presented:

- Quality assurance in VET in the Netherlands
- VET schools in times of disruptive technologies
- Role of (teams of) teachers in quality assurance
- Involving stakeholders and showing accountability

During the discussion groups the following questions have been discussed:

- 1 What's your view on quality of VET in a changing world?
- 2 Which role do (teams of) teachers have when it comes to quality assurance?
- 3 How do VET providers display quality?

In the following paragraph you will find the outcomes of the group discussions. After that you can find the advice given on how the Netherlands could strengthen their quality assurance in VET with some cautious conclusions.

2 Outcome group discussions

2.1 What's your view on quality of VET in a changing world?

One of the things all groups agreed upon is that these changing times ask for a more flexible approach towards quality and therefore quality assurance. But with a more flexible attitude towards VET, quality and the systems supporting this, comes a need to have the aim clear.

One should enter into dialogue about what quality is with all the involved parties, e.g. stakeholders, national and regional policy makers, teachers, parents, students. For example, the topic of the qualification structure in the Netherlands is seen as a relevant subject of discussion – is it able to move along quickly with the current and future changes in the field? And if not, how do you deal with this in a way that still makes it easy to adjust the curriculum to the innovations asked from society and the field?

In one of the groups this resulted in a conversation about what education (and VET in specific) needs to be prepared for the future and its changes. Conclusion; transferable skills are becoming more and more important, such as soft skills. This is where the basis of Life Long Learning starts, which is starting to play a more significant role, although it is not implemented yet. The idea of 'shop till you drop' in VET came up, increased flexibility of the education and courses. Learners can choose to learn what and whenever they want based on their needs throughout a lifetime. Of course delivering quality should always be the aim. It stimulates thinking of lifelong learning instead of qualification-based thinking.

The dominant perspective of the labour market is that schools are behind – in knowledge, technology and materials used in schools. We should prepare students how to be a constant learning and developing person. The question is: are our teachers these types of people? This leads to the assumption that the key to being able to adapt to the constant changes in labour market lies with the teachers. Teachers should learn to deal with changes and innovations. The ability to change of teachers should be a focus point.

Stakeholders should be involved and asked about what quality is for them. It is a term that is widely interpreted and does not mean the same thing for every person or organisation. All involved have different interests – make sure you exchange those and talk about what quality in VET is.

In order to achieve all of the above, a change in our VET culture is needed. Teachers should be motivated to learn and develop, perhaps even to become a hybrid teacher (one that works in education as well as the field of the profession they teach). VET institutions should start to involve stakeholders more in order to find out what quality (assurance) means for them and stay up-to-date on all the innovations in that field.

2.2 Which role do (teams of) teachers have when it comes to quality assurance?

Right now many educational teams do not see quality assurance as a helpful process in their work. Sometimes it is even experienced as an administrative burden, which takes away some of the teacher's autonomy.

Something to focus on should be that the teams of teacher should be a central part of quality assurance – this is where the process of quality assurance begins. Teams need to have a shared goal and clear tasks on this topic. In order to accomplish this professional development might be necessary. But before people design or organize quality assurance should start to think from the perspective of teacher when implementing measurements for quality assurance.

Some of the subjects in this professionalization process could be:

- Finding a shared language on quality assurance
- Use of data (how do you make the use of data accessible?)
- How good QA could improve the quality of their education
- Teamwork (on this subject) – working towards a learning community

Overall the conclusion in answering this question is that teachers should have a role when it comes to quality assurance. Quality assurance should be perceived as an added value by teachers, giving clear answers to the questions as 'why is it important for our work'? This should result in ownership with the teachers on quality assurance and intrinsic motivation to work on raising quality (quality culture).

2.3 How do VET providers display quality?

During the session around this question input was given in a short presentation which focused on the different stakeholders (such as students, parents and the labour market) and what they would like to see. It seems that students are interested in other things than staff or inspectorate. Also, parents have their own wishes when it comes to quality of VET providers. The challenge is whether you can provide all stakeholders with the right information on quality, based on what their wishes/demands are.

In the discussion groups it was emphasized that parents are not sufficiently recognized as stakeholders. Even though it widely known that parents have quite some influence on youngsters and the choices they (can) make. In general it is necessary to make sure stakeholders have confidence in the school and the education it provides. What do the different stakeholders need on this topic? The field of stakeholders is diverse which makes it difficult to know what you should show or display when it comes to quality (assurance).

One of the things VET organisations could do is to let students tell something about the quality of their education. This could be a nice alternative to just publishing reports. Besides, every stakeholder has different expectations (e.g. a city council sometimes demands more from VET than the legislation states, which was not considered as desirable as such by the foreign participants). In other cases a stakeholder might be a client as well. VET organisations should take this into account. Find a proper and continuing way to get all different stakeholders involved.

When it comes to the year reports, the questions rises in what way these are used to actually work on quality improvement. It should be prevented that organisations provide reports which then end up biting dust.

2.4 Advice for the Netherlands

For the advice attendants were asked to summarise all they had heard and formulate their advice based on the hand-method. This means that one uses the hand to focus on each finger – every finger has a different meaning:

- Thumb: What are we good at? (And is something we could perhaps expand?)
- Index finger: Where should we be heading towards? What lies in the future?
- Middle finger: What is it you don't like about what we do? (So, what should we stop doing or get rid of?)
- Ring finger: What are we loyal to? (So, what is something we should keep just the way it is?)
- Pinky: What makes us feel small? (So, what is a possible danger to us?)

In general the advice on strengthening quality assurance in the Netherlands comes to the following:

What people see as the most positive point is that we have a mature and well thought through system of quality management/assurance. The use of data in our Dutch system is an additional positive element. The participants are positive about the focus on quality culture in the Netherlands.

What we should focus on for the future is the flexibility in education and its quality assurance system in order to be able to deal with the changes and innovations of the future (in society as well as the labour market). To achieve this, professionalization of teachers and teams in VET is essential. Trying to get a grasp of why it is important to teachers to work with quality assurance and quality management could be part of that process. Also using data to reflect, forecast and predict would be necessity.

In our Dutch system of quality assurance we should be aware of the tendency to develop bureaucracy and creating a system which focuses on control. It would be an improvement

to see how more trust and less control could be implemented in the system. The system should be a tool, not a goal on itself.

Something we should remain the way it is, is staying proactive and continue to conduct the dialogue (about quality in VET with all stakeholders). The way most VET institutions work in teams is something that adds to the firm system of quality management.

The potential danger of the Dutch current system is not being able to become flexible in the future combined with the fact that teachers and other educational professionals do not see how quality assessment and assurance could be useful for them (or as said in one of the posters; sexy). Awareness on this topic and professionalization of teachers is a necessity.

3 Conclusions

The rich discussions from all the various perspectives and the outcome made the study visit a success. The outcomes and the end using the hand method gave a good summary of the strong points of the Dutch system and the recommendations according to the attendants.

In brief, the attendants think that the Dutch system of quality assurance is strongly developed. But to make sure to be able to deal with the upcoming changes also flexibility is necessary, especially for preventing bureaucracy, as well on national level as on school level. Also the development in quality assurance, dialogue and peer learning in schools and between schools is positive valued by the attendants. The role of teachers in quality assurance should further increase to be able to deal with the upcoming changes. Quality assurance starts with the teachers. Teachers should have ownership. To be able to that teachers should embrace upcoming changes, perhaps as part of further professional development and work on quality assurance, using skills like critical reflection, analysing data and dialogue. In order to promote this we should start to think from the perspective of teachers when working on quality assurance, to make it perceived as added value and meaningful by them.

As the Dutch NRP we have noticed that the attendants in general have a positive perspective on the Dutch quality assurance system in VET. To give a broader perspective, next time, we also would like to present, besides the system itself, facts and data on the quality of VET in the Netherlands, the results of the quality assurance system, for example the conclusions in the annual report of the Dutch Inspectorate. From there specific bottlenecks in the Dutch system could be presented and attendants could formulate recommendations for these bottlenecks. Because in the end the system itself is not the objective but the quality that results from the system.

It is recommended for a next study visit to make use of the EQAVET framework in a more explicit way as a shared reference point.

The Dutch quality assurance in VET is developing. The NCP and other parties are working on new ideas how to improve the quality assurance. This advice will be taken into account in further developments.

Attachments





