

## Change capability in VET: results of the expert meeting

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**Teaching teams in vocational education and training (VET) operate in a complex environment. Changed regulations, the changing requirements of students and industry, the diverse intake of students and work pressure are factors that contribute to this. Vocational programmes should also continuously meet employers' needs. Management and staff provide teams with support and guidance in implementing this task. What steps need to be taken by whom in order to change together? This article contains the results of the expert meeting on Change Capability in VET, organised by the NCP EQAVET<sup>1</sup>, which was held online due to COVID-19 and as a journey through time featuring several meeting sessions.**

The journey began with an online session in October featuring a presentation on the team power project at Deltion College. After the session, a number of the participants worked on further deepening their knowledge during a buddy programme. They were inspired by a video by Monika Louws, assistant professor and researcher in teachers' professional development, and by an interview with Mario Kieft, researcher at the Open University of the Netherlands and an expert on behaviour in organisations. The journey concluded with an online session in December.

A total of 11 people who work in different positions in the VET sector, such as teacher, training manager, policy officer and director, participated in the expert meeting. The aim of the meeting was to find an answer to the question: What steps need to be taken, and

by whom, to strengthen change capability in VET?

To prepare for the expert meeting, various recent developments and studies on change capability were summarised in a background document, such as the six factors for working together on educational quality, quality

culture and high-performance teams. The results of the expert meeting held two years ago were also discussed. At that time, the conditions essential for change capability were the main points

of discussion, such as the opportunity to learn and experiment, trusting each other, having an external focus and engaging in dialogue, and taking a position as a team on developments in society.

The last page of this document contains an overview of relevant publications.

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There is no fixed 'recipe' or predictable module, according to one of the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The NCP EQAVET is the National Coordination Point for European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training. The NCP works to enhance quality assurance in vocational education and training in the Netherlands under the auspices of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Key focus areas are quality culture, working on quality in teaching teams and the connection between the layers of the VET institutions.

## Issues

We embarked on the journey by discussing the questions raised by the participants. These included questions such as: how can we inspire teams to demonstrate more ambition, shared responsibility for and ownership of quality and change? How can we galvanise teams? How can we instil intrinsic motivation? What is a good balance between autonomy versus top-down command and providing frameworks? And how should we go about this? In some cases, teams point out where there is room for improvement, but they tackle improvements on an ad hoc basis and do not sufficiently evaluate what type of change is really needed. Other participants stated that changes do take place, but they are not permanent; good initiatives fade away again. What is needed to make lasting changes? How can we avoid reverting to old habits? How do we continue the steps we have already taken?

Do these questions sound familiar? These are questions that bubble up in many people's minds when they think about change. Below, you can read the insights the participants in the expert meeting obtained and the answers found.

## Team power

Deltion College set up the Team Power project to galvanise teams. The project aims to strengthen the change and execution capability of teams and the organisation. Erik Laban, client, and Erik Mondriaan, project leader at Deltion College, joined the expert

meeting and shared the process approach and results to date.

The process consists of a development programme for teams and for staff and management, as well as training on workplace learning for coaches. Learning during the process is designed around the principle of workplace learning, or learning from situations arising in the workplace.

The key characteristics of the approach are:

- learning from and working on achieving the key objectives of the Deltion College quality agenda;
- focusing on the development stage of the teams (they have acknowledged that no team is the same, for instance).

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To kick off the sessions, all teams took part in an interactive team session, in which they defined their ambitions and the areas in

which they wanted to develop further as a team. A bottleneck that emerged at the start of the process was the perception among training managers and teams that it was a top-down process. To remove this perception, the project leader held several discussions with the training managers. During these discussions, he was able to reassure them that the intention behind the kick-off sessions was to obtain an idea of where the team stands and their development requirements and that it was up to the teams to formulate their own ambitions within the frameworks. These discussions have fostered a connection and narrowed the distance between the central and decentralised levels.

The outcome of the interactive team session was a team graphic containing each team's ambitions and challenges. The team graphics show management and the Executive Board of Deltion College where the teams stand and will help in formulating an answer to the question of whether the objectives set are

realistic. Internally trained coaches will provide guidance to teams during their further development. The team graphics form the starting point for their further development and provide a good basis for in-depth discussions.

*Example from the practice of one of the participants in the expert meeting:*

*'My name is Simone Kooij, and I work as an education adviser at MBO College Hilversum. I work on education issues together with the teaching teams. One of the things I do to achieve good results is to ask in-depth questions. I have found that teams are quick to jump into action mode. By asking questions first, it becomes clear what is and is not important and what goal the team aims to pursue. Without these questions and the goal, any actions and changes initiated will soon be abandoned. The common goal fosters connections, enables the team to overcome obstacles from within the organisation and produces results. It's extremely beneficial to us that our management encourages us to think out-of-the-box. It's great to have such support. I personally believe that it is important to listen sincerely to what is going on in the teams. Even if they ask critical questions. By listening to the issues they have and including them in the plan, a better plan emerges. My tip to others would therefore be: know what is going on, start with teaching practice, go and observe in the classroom and listen to students and teachers.'*

## **Adaptive Ability**

Monika Louws, assistant professor and researcher in teachers' professional development, conducts research on teachers' adaptive ability. Adaptive ability is not only the ability to act, but also the ability to apply different or new views, motivations and knowledge to changing contexts that serve as the basis for new action, according to Monika. Adaptive ability is required to be able to strike a balance between exploitation and exploration, between 'exploiting' everything that has been developed and is good in VET and exploring uncharted territory. Adaptive ability might be needed to resolve the various dilemmas in VET and to navigate towards preferable futures.

To develop adaptive ability in organisations, firstly, it appears that the various actors in the teaching organisation need to be aware of the options within changing contexts. They need to develop 'antennae', as it were, for the changes that are currently happening and the changes that are worth considering or not. Secondly, actors should be given the time to develop the capacities to seek a balance between efficient teaching and innovation. At the same time, a dilemma appears to present itself when the words 'efficient' and 'teaching' are expressed harmoniously in the same sentence. This raises the question whether there is a greater imbalance between these words, and consequently the worlds behind them, than is currently being suggested. Thirdly, teaching organisations should be organised in such a way that exploitation and exploration are consciously weighed, with systems in place to

facilitate these choices. If the goals and strategies of the teaching organisation should be both specific and 'open-ended' (Honing & Hatch, 2012) because they can be adjusted, it appears to be vitally important for all staff to feel co-ownership for the decision-making process that has led to them. Often, terms such as 'vision' and 'strategy' are still perceived as 'it has nothing to do with me' or 'they can do whatever they like, practice is

different' by teachers where judgements and actions within the framework of these systems are required and expected. To examine how adaptive ability manifests itself in organisations, the teacher's agenda expedition has set out a research strategy for the years ahead (see [www.expeditielerarenagenda.nl](http://www.expeditielerarenagenda.nl)).

*Example from the practice of one of the participants in the expert meeting:*

*'My name is Stefanie Veendijk, and I work as an education consultant at ROC van Twente. I am also a lecturer in the Master's programme in Learning and Innovation at Aeres University of Applied Sciences. I develop learning pathways together with lecturers and am discussing the purpose of education with them. I talk to teachers about "a sense of responsibility", "giving students a wake-up call" and "they worked on it as a class, really clever and cool that it worked like that". When it comes to management, I often encounter other interests that I feel are further away from the purpose. That is when terms such as "rolling out", "getting on board" and/or "implementing" are the buzz words. Sometimes, "resistance to change" and the "old way of thinking" come up during discussions. Teaching is accompanied by a certain vulnerability as part of the teaching profession, and in addition to technical didactic and fundamental issues, the reflective dialogue on it is also, and perhaps even more frequently, accompanied by moral, political and emotional issues (Kelchtermans, 2016). These issues cannot be included in systems or "rolled out" efficiently based on an implementation plan. This requires dialogue and "discourse" and, above all, the ability to understand each other. My tip to others would therefore be: conduct the discourse with each other and find a common language for the common task, taking into account the different approaches and perspectives.'*

## Facilitating change

Mario Kieft opened the discussion with the statement 'Change cannot be controlled'. However, what you can do, in Mario's view, is facilitate change. The three key ingredients for change, according to Mario, are the quality of the meeting, variety and collectivity. Change is discussed at length in formal settings, such as meetings and offsite retreats, termed as 'on-stage' by Mario.

But what matters is what happens in informal settings, around the coffee machine, or 'off-stage'. This is where people exchange their real, genuine opinions and views.

This is the place where people influence each other and where change happens. You have influence in properly facilitating these meetings and this process, but not on the outcome. If you want change, it is beneficial to appreciate different opinions. When people exchange different opinions, new ideas emerge. Change begins with confusion, according to Mario Kieft. Finally, it is important that people feel a sense of collectivity. Togetherness and a shared

goal/vision keep the group together and encourage people to work on change together.

The rationale: 'the world is changing, so we must change' is a frequently used reason for change. Mario stated that, for many people, this is not a reason to change. However, he explained that such a statement is useful for showing the outside world or the layer above you in the organisation that you are working

on the right things. It results in appreciation and legitimacy. Change happens when someone has a good idea, knows how to galvanise support from people and knows how to arrange or obtain budget and time for it. As a change leader, you will benefit from earning trust. Trust makes people share what they really mean. And be mindful of persuasion, as this will only reinforce people's existing perceptions.

*Example from the practice of one of the participants in the expert meeting:*

*'My name is Els Vijfhuizen, and I am director at Landstede MBO. I support teams during the change process by inspiring them and making them think creatively. To be able to commit to goals, you need time and the opportunity to consider them. I create these. I allow time for discussion so that perspectives can be exchanged. During these discussions, we look at whether we are doing the right things and ensure that we avoid rushing headlong into everything. To stimulate the process, I throw in some strange ideas now and then. This creates confusion and makes people think. I see a great deal of reluctance and a fear of rules. I make sure that people can start thinking about education and learning again. To actually achieve results, the subsequent step 2 is just as important: formulate a goal and form a group of people with the right expertise to achieve it. My tip to others: put your feet up and relax once in a while, and get some food for thought on the way home or while doing the dishes. Don't forget that step 2 comes after that, which is when things are worked out concretely.'*

## Conclusion

During this alternatively organised expert meeting, the participants discussed what steps need to be taken and by whom in order to strengthen change capability in VET. This is a complex issue to which there is no easy answer. It emerged from the various contributions that it is a matter of challenging teams to work on their ambitions, developing teachers' adaptive ability and properly facilitating the change process. In response to the question of what steps need to be taken and by whom, the participants concluded that it is not certain people who need to do something, but rather a number of ingredients that need to be present.

Ingredients such as a concrete reason or a requirement, good process management (could be done by anyone), people with a vision or good ideas (could be anyone), an environment that will facilitate this by ensuring trust and a safe climate and others serving as a role model. If these elements are present, change capability will be strengthened. However, it was also concluded that it is not easy to implement these elements effectively. There is no fixed 'recipe' or predictable module, according to one of the participants. It would be interesting to explore this further in a follow-up session, in which we can make the theory even more concrete. The participants commented that they found the exchange of ideas valuable. They appreciated the fact that the expert

meeting was able to take place despite these strange times.

This article was produced with input from the participants in the 2020 expert meeting. Thank you for your contributions.

### Overview of relevant publications

- [Praatplaat lerend vermogen onderwijsteams \[Learning capacity of education teams prompting board\]:](https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Praatplaat-1.pdf)  
<https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Praatplaat-1.pdf> with explanation:  
<https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Praatplaat-lerend-vermogen-onderlegger-2.pdf>
- [Verslag Inspiratiedagen 2018 lerend vermogen onderwijsteams \[Learning capacity of education teams 2018 Inspiration Days report\]:](https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Artikel_inspiratiedagen_NCP_EQAVET_november-2018.pdf)  
[https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Artikel\\_inspiratiedagen\\_NCP\\_EQAVET\\_november-2018.pdf](https://eqavet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Artikel_inspiratiedagen_NCP_EQAVET_november-2018.pdf)

- [Onderwijskundig leiderschap van onderwijsteams \[Didactic leadership of education teams\]:](https://eqavet.nl/onderwijskundig-leiderschap-van-onderwijsteams-interventies-in-handelingen-en-gedrag/)  
<https://eqavet.nl/onderwijskundig-leiderschap-van-onderwijsteams-interventies-in-handelingen-en-gedrag/>
- [Samenwerken aan onderwijskwaliteit \[Working on the quality of education together\]:](https://cinop.nl/publicaties/zes-pijlers-voor-het-succesvol-werken-aan-onderwijskwaliteit/)  
<https://cinop.nl/publicaties/zes-pijlers-voor-het-succesvol-werken-aan-onderwijskwaliteit/>
- [10 inzichten voor het versterken van kwaliteitscultuur \[10 insights into reinforcing quality culture\]:](https://eqavet.nl/kwaliteitscultuur-versterken-in-onderwijsteams-in-het-mbo-10-inzichten/)  
<https://eqavet.nl/kwaliteitscultuur-versterken-in-onderwijsteams-in-het-mbo-10-inzichten/>

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