Graduate tracking – case study 3 | Using data to improve the quality of a VET-program in The Netherlands

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This research paper is the third of a series of three, published by EQAVET, to describe several practices of the current state of VET (Vocational Education and Training) graduate tracking on VET provider level in the Netherlands and other EU member states. This series of short papers will be translated into a longer research paper in 2023 in which the conclusions of all three papers will be presented. The goal of this paper(s) is to provide guidelines, best practices and lessons learned from the different case studies.

The third case study focuses on how an education team of a study program within a Dutch VET-institution has used data, including graduate tracking, to improve the results of the quality of their study program. This paper aims to provide information on the background of the case, the process, challenges, and recommendations.

Graduate tracking

Tracking graduates can provide insight in the quality of the qualifications and the programs offered in Vocational Education and Training and to a certain extent how well the programs meet the labour market needs. Graduate tracking can be used for different goals, for example for: 1) keeping the curricula up to date to make sure students learn relevant skills for employability or 2) improve career counselling and guidance for current and future students.

Background of the case study

Every student has the right to education which is of satisfactory quality. To ensure every student can assume that the programs they follow provide adequate quality, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education issues a framework. This framework describes the inspection regime for Dutch VET-education. Every four years programs of schools are assessed on basic quality requirements. The framework differentiates between qualitative and quantitative assessments. The quantitative assessments consist of a benchmark, based on four key performance indicators (KPIs): year results, diploma results, starters results and early school leavers.

This case study focuses on a particular VET-program within a Dutch VET-institution. Due to continuously achieving poor outcomes with regards to the KPIs mentioned above, the education team of this program initiated a research to give more meaning to the different sets of data they collect, resulting in targeted interventions to improve the quality of their program.

Pedagogical Childcare Worker

The Pedagogical Childcare Worker (Level 3) VET-program has been showing poor results on year-, starters- and diploma results for years, leading to frustration amongst teachers, students and quality assurance staff. Several action plans have already been implemented, deploying a variety of interventions such as more intensive study career counseling, additional individual tutoring, homework assistance, more learning time and intensifying the intake process. Without achieving the desired results, the

education team of the study program felt the need to dig deeper into the available numbers and findings.

Turning signals from data into interventions that fit the target population is a major challenge for any educational institution. It requires a long-term approach and thorough preliminary work. The starting point is the available data: data on early school leavers (part of graduate tracking), diploma results, starters results, year results, attendance and absence percentages, JOB-monitor results and results of employee satisfaction surveys. The VET-program in this case study also collects data during the school year from team meetings, student meetings, individual conversations with students, study progress and often also through conversations with student representatives and sector meetings.

Process

Giving data meaning
The education team of the VET-program started its research by really getting to know terms such as year results, diploma results, etcetera. There is a lot of talk about these terms, but what exactly do the numbers mean? The numbers are mostly about groups of students who left school with or without a diploma. Who were these students again? What was going on with these students? Meaningfully linking the data to the students one had in the classroom provides a very different view of the numbers. Additional explanatory information can be retrieved in the student tracking systems about the circumstances to the school period of specific dropouts. Students who leave institutions without a diploma are difficult to trace. This group can, however, provide the VET-program with a valuable information on how they experienced the program and guidance at the time.

Describing the results of the JOB-monitor in terms of needs
Besides tracking graduates and retrieving more information on why early school leavers left the study program in the first place, the education team also focused on the data collected from current students to improve the quality of their program. The extensive reports of the national JOB-monitor are relatively easy to translate into student needs. The negative scores provide clear guidance to the education team with regards to what they should consider changing or improving. The results of the JOB-monitor often show what students are dissatisfied with, for example about the scheduling of classes. As this showed to be the case in the results, it was interesting for the education team to find out what exactly is wrong with the scheduling: are there too many classes? Too little? At inconvenient times? Or do opinions on this vary much between students? Finding out more about the reasons behind negative scores, through questionnaires or conversations with students, can paint a more complete picture of where specific needs really lie.

Discussing employee satisfaction survey results
Besides the perspective of the student, thoroughly discussing and capturing the needs of the teachers brought balance to the research and strengthened the foundation for the upcoming changes within the programs. Discussing the striking results of the employee satisfaction survey fit very well with the analysis of the JOB monitor. It showed that the satisfaction of the teachers was under considerable pressure. Teachers were particularly bothered by the study attitude of students within their classes. Especially the discrepancy between the students' study attitude at school and the professional attitude at the internship raised questions.

Structural quality assurance dialogue with students

Cyclically engaging with students in dialogue about quality assurance issues you are struggling with as a team produces a constant stream of qualitative data. In this practical study, the format of Stichting LeerKRACHT , the 'student arena' (format for a meaningful conversation with students), provided the program with valuable additions to the data. Questioning and talking through the perspective and experience of the student brought education much closer to the field.

Resulting activities and interventions

Through the research, it was possible for the education team to translate the data into targeted interventions.

More work-based learning

Shifting the ratio of supervised education time to professional practice provided a greater proportion of work-based learning in the course from the beginning of the study program. Theory and practice are purposefully linked to lesson content and practical assignments. The curriculum is now organized by developmental stages instead of the learning contents of previous courses. The subjects such as Pedagogy, Methodical Work and Communication are now integrated into the modules. This requires core teachers to assume a more all-round teaching role and less as subject specialists.

Changing scheduling of classes

Equal class days in terms of length and intensity was a major desire of the students. Predictability in the weekly rhythm brought peace to the students' full schedules. It brought more balance to the weekly schedule that included sports, internship, work, hobbies, school, friends, family, etcetera.

Increased guidance

The students who dropped out during the program as well as students still following the program indicated that they could hide (too) long. Being taught by many teachers gives them a chance to tell a little bit of their story each time. Two permanent core teachers were chosen for these groups, with the goal of creating a deeper bond between student and teacher.

Workplace

Close contact with the field about the content of classes and practical assignments put the program in closer connection with the field. Intensifying contact about the progress of learning in practice and the student's behavior and attitude at school ensured that student development at school and during their internship could be discussed more easily. Learning in school was more recognizably in the service of learning in practice.

Impact

Pedagogical climate

The most obvious impact was the conversion from 13 subject teachers to two core teachers per class. Students with complex issues bonded more quickly with the teachers who were there for them throughout the week. Additional care was brought in more quickly when needed and accepted by the students with less resistance. The group climate, compared to other years, was much more secure and focused on learning and growth. Seeing and being seen takes a lot of effort for the core teachers at the start of the school year but makes management of the group easier, and the guidance safe and warm. Students with problems and/or doubts are noticed earlier and more clearly. This directly impacts dropout rates and thus the program's year results.

Program closer to the professional field

Students built a realistic image of their chosen profession faster due to the fact that the educational program was related to the workplace from the beginning of the program. The contacts with the internship location were taken up intensively in the first weeks in order to make a good start in the collaboration between teacher, internship supervisor and student. This also made it easier to transparently find out if the student is in the right place. Pursuing the goal of having students quickly form a realistic picture of their chosen profession sometimes resulted in conversations about suitability already during the first few weeks. The process of reassignment to a more appropriate study program was initiated much more smoothly which has a positive effect on the year's results, and most importantly on the student's well-being.

Satisfaction
The teachers visibly enjoyed having more impact on student and group formation. The first two months of the school year are intensive for the teachers because of the chosen approach, but afterwards it yields a lot that the program benefits of, and that teachers can enjoy for three years.

Challenges and recommendations

Challenges
Coming up with interventions based on available data is manageable. To do this, generating development time for a longer term is essential. Facilitating time and knowledge to elaborate, sustainably implement, evaluate, and develop the interventions is needed to understand the yearly outcomes and diploma results.

Sustaining an approach within an educational system where most programs are organized differently than yours requires constant positioning. From a thorough analysis, you choose an approach that differs from the norm. The approach is noticeably and visibly positive, but not standard in terms of educational logistics and content and therefore it requires constant focus on that the new (positive) results are caused thanks to the different organization.

Recommendations
Using data as a basis for interventions requires an investment so that the people thinking of and implementing interventions understand what the data means. Linking the data to students' experience and perceptions is valuable if you can translate the students' stories to students' needs without judgment. Data can be a strong foundation for a process of change. The most recent data show the effects of interventions very sharply when these are based on the old data.

Want to know more about this topic?

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