

PROMOTING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN EMPLOYEE TRAINING

NETHERLANDS COUNTRY REPORT



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Abstract

The Netherlands are among the EU countries with the highest lifelong learning rates. The Dutch labor market is in a good shape with low unemployment rates. The social partners play a very crucial role in the Dutch system of employee training. This role is grounded on a well-developed system of consultation of the social partners by the government. The basic principles of employee training in the Netherlands are mostly negotiated by the social partners in collective labor agreements (CLAs). Many CLAs include the introduction of sectoral training funds, the so-called *Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfondsen* (*O&O fondsen*), which play a crucial role in the financing and provision of employee training. At the moment, a mind shift can be observed with the Netherlands trying to introduce a more individual approach to training. This is of particular importance with respect to the increase of the statutory pension age of currently 67 years as well as with respect to faster changing training needs due to global developments like the digitization.

- **Anticipation and identification of skills needs:** The social partners are sensitised for training needs by their members. In addition, they play an active role in the Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (*SBB*). Furthermore, social partner organizations cooperate with VET schools and research institutes. A mind shift in training towards a more individual perspective of skills needs is observable.
- **Mobilising resources:** There is a common understanding that training directly related to the job is paid by employers. Above that, employee training is partly financed through *O&O fondsen*. A lot of sectoral CLAs include the introduction of such training funds. The social partners see a need for reforms of the financing of vocational schools as the current incentives do not meet the labour market needs.
- **Information support and guidance:** The social partners inform their members and via the funds also their non-members about training possibilities. Some *O&O fondsen* organise workshops to inform employees about training opportunities. However, not all employees know about their possibilities and also their rights to training. In particular low-skilled workers are underrepresented in training. These workers are often flex workers and/or face multiple problems (e.g., debts or health problems).
- **Contribution to qualify, transparency and efficiency:** For formal employee training which leads to national certificates, there are national standards. These standards are developed and monitored by the government in cooperation with the social partners and VET institutions. In general, there is a very broad public and private training offer which is not very transparent, in particular for the individual employees. Cooperation between VET providers and funds could be improved.
- **Recognition and validation of competences and qualifications:** The social partners take responsibility for promoting and maintaining a high quality national system of validation of prior learning (*EVC*). There are two different paths for the validation of competences: the labour market route and the education route. *EVC* is not well known among employees and companies.
- **Provision of learning:** The social partners provide training via the *O&O fondsen*. Some funds have their own training facilities. Due to the strong influence of sectoral organisations, the provision of learning strongly depends on the sector. Above that, the social partners are involved in the development of training contents via their participation in the *SBB*.

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1 Introduction

The Netherlands are among the EU countries with the highest lifelong learning rates (Cedefop, 2016). The country met the education and training 2020 benchmark of 15 percent adult participation in learning already a long time ago. Also, the Dutch labor market is in a good shape with high employment (2016: 74.8 percent of working age population) and low unemployment rates (2016: 6.0 percent) (OECD, 2017a and 2017b).

The social partners have a very crucial role in the Dutch system of employee training. This role is grounded on a well-developed system of consultation of the social partners by the government. The basic principles of employee training in the Netherlands are mostly negotiated by the social partners in collective labor agreements (CLAs). Moral and Berger (2013) describe the Dutch training policy as a political transfer of an educational policy based on CLAs. Many CLAs include the introduction of sectoral training funds, the so-called *Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfondsen (O&O fondsen)*, which have a crucial role in the financing and provision of employee training. Training regulations based on CLAs have, however, a very sector-specific focus. At the moment, a mind shift can be observed with the Netherlands trying to introduce a more individual approach to training. This is of particular importance with respect to the increase of the statutory pension age of currently 67 years as well as with respect to faster changing training needs due to global developments like the digitization.

2 Facts and figures on employee training

In the following, central facts and figures on employee training are presented. For the sake of comparability, cross-national statistics are used.

2.1 Participation in employee training

The Adult Education Survey (AES) informs about adult learning. Learning activities are divided into formal education, non-formal education and informal education. Formal education and training is defined as education provided by the system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions that normally constitutes a continuous 'ladder' of full-time education. Non-formal education and training is defined as any organised and sustained learning activities that do not correspond exactly to the above definition of formal education. Non-formal education may therefore take place both within and outside educational institutions (courses, workshops or seminars, guided-on-the-job training – such as planned periods of education, instruction or training directly at the workplace, organised by the employer with the aid of an instructor – and lessons). Informal learning is defined as intentional learning which is less organised and less structured than the previous types. The participation rate in education and training covers participation in both formal and non-formal education and training. Employer-sponsored learning activities are defined as all activities paid at least partially by the employer and/or done during paid working hours.

Table 2-1: Employed persons' participation rate in job-related non-formal education and training

In percent, persons from 25 to 64 years

	2007			2011		
	All	Employer-sponsored	Non employer-sponsored ^u	All	Employer-sponsored	Non employer-sponsored ^u
All	45.6	43.4	2.2	61.8	59.8	2
Men	45.6	43.5	2	62.4	60.5	:
Women	45.7	43.3	2.4	61.1	58.9	2.2
Age groups						
25-34	53.9	51.0	:	66.3	64.0	:
55-64	35.1	33.1	:	48.9	47.2	:
Educational attainment level ¹⁾						
ED 0-2	27.6	25.8	:	39.2	38.2	:
ED 3-4	42.5	40.7	:	60.6	58.4	2.2
ED 5-6	59.6	56.7	2.9	75.1	72.8	:

Source: AES, 2007; 2011; special evaluation of Eurostat

¹⁾ ISCED97

: not available

^u low reliability

Job-related non-formal education and training in the Netherlands is mainly employer-sponsored whereas non-employer sponsored training only plays a subordinate role – as it does on the EU average. The overall participation rate for employed persons in the Netherlands has increased from 45.6 percent in 2007 up to 61.8 percent in 2011. For both years, the participation rate considerably exceeds the EU average (34.1 percent in 2007, 40.8 percent in 2011). This also holds for the shift in participation rates between 2007 and 2011 (+16.2 percentage points in the Netherlands vs. +6.7 percentage points on EU average). The rates went up for both women and men whereby in 2010 men were slightly more likely to take part in CVET than women. Younger people tend to participate more often than the elderly but both age groups were affected by the increase in participation rates on a similar scale. This is in accordance with what is observed for the EU. There are remarkable gaps between different levels of educational attainment: in 2010, 75 percent of people with higher education (ISCED=5-6) participated in job-related non-formal education and training whereas the share was only 39 percent for people with lower education (ISCED=0-2). This again is in accordance with the EU average. According to Cedefop (2016), the gap in training participation and intensity between highly educated and low skilled has widened between 2004 and 2013 (Cedefop, 2016). One objective of the social partners in the Netherlands is also to ensure that employees with flex contracts as well as self-employed persons have the same access to training as employees with permanent employment contracts (STAR, 2016).

The Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) informs about enterprise activities. CVET is divided into courses and other forms of learning. CVET courses are usually separated from the active workplace (learning takes place in locations specially assigned for learning, like a class room or training centre).

They show a high degree of organisation (time, space and content) by a trainer or a training institution. Other forms of CVET are typically connected to the active work and the active workplace, but they can also include participation (instruction) in conferences, trade fairs, etc. for the purpose of learning. The following types of other forms of CVET are identified: planned training through guided-on-the-job training; through job rotation, exchanges, secondments or study visits; through participation (instruction received) in conferences, workshops, trade fairs and lectures; through participation in learning or quality circles; and through self-directed learning/e-learning.

Table 2-2: Companies' participation rate

In percent

	2005			2010		
	All forms of CVET	Courses	Other forms of learning	All forms of CVET	Courses	Other forms of learning
Average	75	70	52	79	70	69
Small	71	65	48	75	65	66
Medium	88	86	68	89	85	76
Big	96	94	73	97	94	89

Source: CVTS, 2005; 2010

Companies' participation rate in continuing vocational training is above the EU average for both 2005 and 2010. Even though the provision of training is much lower in smaller companies, small companies in the Netherlands provide CVET more often than on EU average. In 2005, firms were much more likely to provide courses than other forms of learning. The participation rate stayed constant for courses but it increased sharply for other forms of learning, almost equalling the level of courses in 2010. Small companies are even slightly more likely to participate in other forms of learning than in courses. According to Cedefop (2016), there is an increase of informal learning in the Netherlands. Employees spend 35 percent of their time on tasks that they learn from.

2.2 Motives and barriers for employee training

Table 2-3: Main barriers for employee training

In percent

Individuals	2011	Companies (non-training)	2010
No need for (further) education and training	52	The existing skills and competences of the persons employed corresponded to the current needs of the enterprise	70
Family responsibilities	37	People recruited with the skills needed	42
Conflict with work schedule or training organised at inconvenient time	28	No time	26

Source: AES, 2011; CVTS, 2010; multiple answers possible

When asked for obstacles to participation in (more) education and training, most individuals stated no need for (further) education and training (52 percent). Family responsibilities and health problems, conflict with work schedule or the training being organised at an inconvenient time were also often mentioned (37 percent and 28 percent). No need for (further) education and training is also the main obstacle on EU average but named slightly less often than in the Netherlands (50 percent). Family responsibilities and conflict with work schedule rank also number two and three on EU average (21 percent and 18 percent). From the point of view of non-training companies, the main barriers for not participating in employee training are sufficient skills and competences of the employees (70 percent), the recruitment of people with skills needed (42 percent) and a lack of time (26 percent). The shares are fairly close to what can be observed for the EU (77 percent, 49 percent and 32 percent). Taking into account all reasons for not providing CVET, non-training companies in the Netherlands seem to see less obstacles than these firms do on average in the EU.

3 Legal framework and institutional setting

3.1 Embedment of CVET in general education system

Initial and continuing VET are closely connected in the Netherlands. It is possible to receive public support for training up to a Master's degree. However, many Dutch don't know about this possibility and therefore do not use it. Nevertheless, in 2016, 45.2 percent of the population in the age group 25 to 34 had a higher degree which is far above EU-average degree (Eurostat, 2017). Around four out of ten persons have a middle qualification.

Mostly young persons enter upper secondary vocational education programmes (*middelbaar beroepsopleiding – MBO*) at the age of 16 after the secondary pre-vocational school-based programmes. At secondary level, there are around 300 apprenticeship offers at four qualification levels with a duration from half a year to four years (BQ-Portal, 2017; Cedefop, 2016). A level 4 diploma gives access to higher professional education. The four qualification levels are modularly structured. Courses on all four levels can function as initial VET or continuing VET. The boundaries are not very distinct. Therefore, providers offering initial VET are often also involved in offering continuing VET. For young persons it is possible to learn a qualification in a full-time college based pathway (*beroepsopleidende leerweg – BOL*) or a work-based pathway (*beroepsbegeleidende leerweg – BBL*). Both pathways lead to the same diploma. In 2013/14, most VET graduates completed a level 4 programme in upper secondary education (Cedefop, 2016). More than half of level 4 graduates continue in higher professional education. Learners can move from the vocational track to the general track and vice versa, which is, however, not very common. The majority of pupils at age 15 are enrolled in general programs (72 percent) (Cedefop, 2016).

3.2 Regulatory level of CVET

The division of responsibilities for adult learning in the Netherlands can be broadly defined in the following way: the state is responsible for formal education which leads to a national certificate for adults as well as for further education of unemployed; the social partners are responsible for training for employees at the risk of unemployment and other employee (Cedefop, 2016; Moraal/Berger, 2013). The regulation of employee training offered by social partners in the Netherlands is primarily regulated by CLAs on sectoral level. CLAs must be registered by the Ministry for Employment and Social Affairs and are often declared as universally binding for the whole sector. However, they can only be classified as generally binding if they provide agreements on training (van der Meer/van der Meijden, 2013).

The role of the social partners in the regulatory process is institutionalised by their participation in the Social and Economic Council (*Sociaal Economisch Raad - SER*). The *SER* was set up by law in 1950 and is the permanent advisory body for the cabinet and parliament (SER, 2017). The legal basis for representation in the *SER* can be found in the Act on the Social and Economic Council (*Wet op de Sociaal-Economische Raad*). Members of the *SER* are three main union confederations, three main employer confederations and one-third independent members appointed by the government. Consultation takes place mainly through request for advice but the *SER* can also give advice on its own initiative. Furthermore, the social partners are organised in the bipartite Foundation of Labour (*Stichting van de Arbeid - STAR*). The *STAR* has an advisory role towards the social partners at sectoral and local level who are engaged in collective bargaining. The social partners stimulate employee training in particular via CLAs and the introduction of sectoral training and development funds (*Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfondsen – O&O fondsen*) which are financed by companies via a payroll levy (Cedefop, 2016).

Due to the close connection of initial and continuing VET, the Adult and Vocational Education Act (*Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs*) which came into force in 1996 is also relevant for employee training. The *WEB* constitutes a framework for school- and work-based VET. With the *WEB*, different types of VET were integrated and put under the roof of the regional, mostly public training centres like the *Regionale Opleidingscentra (ROC)* and agricultural training centres (*Agrarische Opleidingscentra – AOC*) which provide initial VET but also have an important role in the provision of employee training (Cedefop, 2016). One aim of the *WEB* was to improve the quality of the training offer and improve the connection between the education sector and the labour market. Furthermore, training standards and measures to reduce the number of drop-outs were introduced.

In the Netherlands, there is a tendency that more and more responsibility is given to regional and local – often private – agencies (see also, for example, Chapter 4.5). On the regional level the *ROCs*, local employment agencies as well as enterprises are important actors – sometimes co-financed by national and European funds (Moraal/Berger, 2013). In general, there is a high level of autonomy for VET providers (Cedefop, 2016). The training providers are, for example, very autonomous in designing the training programme leading to the acquisition of the qualification for which the state regulates the standards in terms of training outcomes (Ulicna/Curth, 2013). The system is a combination of centralised education policy with decentralised administration and management of schools. Schools have a large autonomy in their internal organisation, their teaching and the choice of teaching materials. The freedom of the schools is restricted by regulations on the attainment of teaching targets, a minimum number of teaching hours, examination and occupational requirements.

In general, there is a strong partnership between educational institutions, stakeholders and the social partners. In this context, the Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (*Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven – SBB*) has a key role (Cedefop, 2016). Qualifications are developed within *SBB* under the cooperation of social partners and VET providers who are represented in the board of the *SBB*. The coordination between VET and the labour market takes place within eight sector chambers under the roof of the *SBB* (Cedefop, 2016). The qualification structure is based on the description of competences, learning outcomes and labour market demands. The *SBB* is also responsible for accrediting and coaching companies offering work placements in initial VET. The *SBB* started work in its current form in 2015. Before, many legal tasks of the *SBB* were performed by former so-called VET expertise centres.

3.3 Public financing/funds and tax incentives

The government supports employee training via subsidy schemes. There is, for example, a subsidy scheme for companies to cover the costs of offering learning places in dual tracks (BBL) (Cedefop, 2016). This subsidy scheme replaced the Wage Tax Relief Act (*Wet vermindering afdracht loonbelasting en premie volksverzekeringen*) which allowed employers to pay lower taxes for certain employees which were engaged in vocational training.

Employees can deduct the costs for vocational training from their income taxes. Currently, subsidy schemes for employees are, however, under discussion as they are mainly used by high-skilled employees and less used by low-skilled employees who are underrepresented in training measures. Between 2009 and 2011, the so-called Part-Time Unemployment Act allowed employers to reduce the working hours of their employees and employees' wage losses were compensated by part-time unemployment benefit. One condition to use this instrument was that employers must provide vocational training for staff on short-term working. According to some stakeholders, this instrument – even though it faded out – played an important role in creating a training culture in companies (Eurofound, 2009). Apart from that, many resources for employee training are generated by the social partners via the *O&O fondsen*, the sectoral funds for training (see Chapter 4.2). During the economic crisis there was the possibility of using sectoral budget for co-financing projects on education and training. Sectoral and regional organisations could ask for support for training purposes for up to two years. These projects were very successful, targeting mainly disadvantaged workers and workers in need of reskilling. The government though did not allow an extension over the two years.

3.4 Regulations on training leave

The right on training leave is not present in the national legislation. However, many CLAs include regulations on training leave. According to Eurofound (2009), in 2006, 112 of 122 training agreements touched training leave, for example via regulations on time-saving arrangements. The agreements differ significantly between sectors. The provision of training leave under collective agreements often include various specific arrangements for different disadvantaged groups, e.g., low-qualified, low-paid, ageing, disabled and migrant employees. As a result, the chance of being granted training leave under this instrument is actually greater for these target groups (Cedefop, 2012).

3.5 Training providers

An important actor with regard to initial as well as continuing (formal) VET are the approximately 40 regional, publicly funded multi-sectoral training centres (*ROC and AOC*). Apart from that, there are many private training providers. There exists no comprehensive overview over private training providers in the Netherlands. Private VET providers are relatively autonomous and there is a high level of privatisation and decentralisation (Ulicna/Curth, 2013). According to Cedefop, 80 percent of lifelong learning among the 25- to 65-year-old takes part via private non-government-funded providers. The offer of government-funded VET providers is often more aimed at low-skilled adults and the provision of formal education programs for students and adults which lead to a formal diploma (Cedefop, 2016). In addition, some sectors and companies, institutions from the public sector as well as training funds have introduced their own training facilities.

A survey among private training providers suggests that there were 16,000 CVET providers in 2014 who had a turnover of 3.4 billion Euro in 2014. While the number of providers has decreased by 3,000 since 2010, there was an increase in turnover by 6 percent. Half of the training courses lasted five days or less.

The share of longer courses decreased from 17.3 to 12.0 percent between 2010 and 2014. About 30 percent of courses led to a sectoral or professional qualification, 15 percent to an upper secondary or tertiary qualification. The majority of courses led to no official qualification. Finally, there was an increasing share of blended learning possibilities (Cedefop, 2016).

The social partners criticise that the offer of the public schooling system like, for example, from the ROCs does not really fit the needs of the working people. There should be more flexibility and room for tailor-made solutions, for example, part-time courses or courses with shorter duration (see also Chapter 4.6).

4 The role of the social partners

The social partners have a crucial role in the provision of employee training in the Netherlands. This influence is based on a corporatist system with institutionalised cooperation and a consensus-oriented approach. While unions and employers' associations have a strong presence at the national level, union presence at company level is rather weak (Eurofound, 2015). The coverage by collective bargaining agreements reaches 80 percent of employees, which is much higher than the trade union density of 20 percent. One explanation for this discrepancy is that employers need to treat unionised and non-unionised employees in the same way (free-rider problem). Statistics Netherlands does not provide figures on employers' membership in associations but according to estimations, there is an 80 to 90 percent coverage (Eurofound, 2015). Most employers belong to a sector-based organisation that represents the interests of employers in a particular sector. Works councils (*ondernemingsraad*) must be set up in enterprises with more than 50 employees. They have extensive information and consultation rights and some decision-making powers and cover 81 percent of all establishments. In enterprises with 10 to 50 employees, a personnel delegation (*personeelsvertegenwoordiging*) with less rights may be set up voluntarily by the employer. If there is no such institution, the employer must hold a twice-yearly meeting of employees.

The main actor on the side of the employees' representation is the Federation of the Netherlands Trade Unions (*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, FNV*). Other federations are the Christian National Trade Union Federation (*Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond – CNV*) and the Trade Union Confederation for Professionals (*Vaakcentrale voor Professionals – VCP*). By the end of 2014 the *FNV* had around 1,131,600 members.

The umbrella organisations on the side of the employers' representation are the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (*Vereniging Nederlandse Ondernemers – Nederlands Christelijk Werkgeversverbond – VNO-NCW*) with estimated more than 115,000 members and the Royal Association SME-Netherlands for small and medium-sized firms (*Koninklijke Vereniging MKB-Nederland – MKB-Nederland*) with 150.000 members.

4.1 Anticipation and identification of skills needs

The social partners and in particular the sectoral organisations have a crucial role in the anticipation and identification of skills needs. In the first place, the social partners are sensitised for training needs by their members. In addition, the social partners have an active role in the Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (*SBB*, see also Chapter 3.2) in which stakeholders of different institutions exchange and discuss new training needs. Furthermore, many trade unions as well as employers' associations cooperate with research institutes. One important institute is the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (*Researchcentrum voor Onderwijs en Arbeidsmarkt –*

ROA) which is specialised in labour market forecasting and skills anticipation. Also the *SBB* has a research department (Cedefop, 2016). Finally, the social partners are represented in the boards of the *O&O fondsen*. In secondary education, 15 percent of training contents of the qualification can be freely chosen. VET providers like the ROCs can use this freedom to develop and introduce new training contents with different sectors. One example is a training module which introduces the technique to install solar panels on roofs. This new training was first developed within the ROCs for employees, but it could also be used for initial VET students as voluntary module and it can also be introduced in the compulsory curricula of initial VET, if the labour market demands this.

Thus, there are several channels through which the social partners can anticipate skills needs of their members early and can also take the initiative to start a dialogue with responsible actors about new qualifications or the renewal of an existing qualification. On the company level, many companies organise regular employee feedback interviews. These are, however, often very ad hoc and could be used more strategically to identify individual skills needs.

The common understanding of the social partners about training responsibilities is that all individuals must take responsibility for their own training activities. However, employees must be facilitated to take up this responsibility and learn how to identify which skills needs they have. A mind shift in training is observable: away from a training which is mainly focused on sectoral needs to a training which keeps up the employability of employees until the statutory retirement age of 67 years (and this age will increase with the average life expectancy). The challenge is that employees need more support in finding the appropriate training measures for themselves. Some employees are not able to do their job until retirement, for example, if it is physically too demanding. In these cases, keeping up the employability could also mean that they have to change the sector. According to Cedefop (2016), training in the Netherlands generates considerable spillover effects: 44 percent of the trained employees expect that the knowledge which they have developed in training could also be useful in other sectors. Nevertheless, the sector specific focus of the *O&O fondsen* is a challenge when organizing training based on the individual, sector-independent needs. More cooperation between the training funds could be useful. The rising need for more individualised, tailor-made training measures is even more difficult to organise and it is expensive as well. However, E-Learning offers new possibilities which can be better used in the future.

4.2 Mobilising resources

There is a common understanding in the Netherlands that training directly related to the job is paid by employers. Above that, employee training is partly financed through the sectoral funds for training (*Opleidings- en Ontwikkelingsfondsen – O&O fondsen*). A lot of sectoral CLAs include the introduction of such training funds. Since the 1980s the social partners agreed on moderate wage increases in exchange for other non-wage based concessions (Moraal/Berger, 2013). Another idea behind the funds was that sectoral funds would stimulate training in general. Companies might be more willing to invest in training via the funds because this sector-wide financing reduces companies' fear that their trained employees are bought out by other businesses who have not invested in training (poaching) (van der Meer/van der Meijden, 2013).

Approximately one fifth of training is paid by the funds. Above that, the *O&O fondsen* organise an important training infrastructure, establishing networks, education agreements, regulations for the supply and demand of education, financial solutions, guidance for employees etc. There are about 125 of these funds which are governed by social partners and are primarily financed by companies via a payroll levy. There are large and small funds – considering the amount of the payroll levy as well as with regard to the coverage of companies and employees. Important funds are found, for example, in the metal and

construction sector. In 2007, 5.9 million of the 6.9 million Dutch employees (86 percent) were under the responsibility of the *O&O fondsen*. According to estimations of the Dutch Statistical Office, the Netherlands spent approximately 1.7 billion Euro for employee training. The inflow into the funds in 2010 was 444.3 million Euro whereof half of the money was spent on education (Moraal/Berger, 2013). In the public sector, there is an average training budget of 1,500 Euros per year per person.

Best practice: Employee Training at NedTrain

NedTrain is the maintenance company of Dutch Railways (*Nederlandse Spoorwegen – NS*) with approximately 3,000 employees. Whenever the introduction of new technologies is coming up at NedTrain, an education and training plan for the employees is developed concurrently. Training is either organised in cooperation with public VET schools, as in-house training with internal and external trainers, or – depending on the technology – with external suppliers. NedTrain successfully cooperates with different VET schools. With some schools, there is a successful cooperation in terms of setting up an in-house program with learning in the context of work (“hybrid learning environment”) which leads to nationwide recognized diplomas as well as internal obliged certificates. The precondition for this successful cooperation is mutual trust and flexibility on both sides. However, there are also challenges: the training offers by public schools often do not always fit to the needs of companies (content, duration and timing of courses) and are willing not all schools to develop apposite training offers in cooperation with the economy. NedTrain also makes use of the possibility to recognise prior learning (EVC, see Chapter 4.5). If training schemes are organised for individual employees who need a certain certificate, this instrument is used to try to find out whether the employee needs to participate in the whole training programme, only in modules or whether it is sufficient to support the employee in the preparation for the final examination. In all training activities, NedTrain is in dialogue with the social partners and the own works council. Even though training is expensive, NedTrain realises that it is not only a necessity to keep up the employability of employees but also an important means to win loyal and satisfied employees.

In particular the trade unions call for more CLAs on general training and the introduction of more sectoral funds. One shortcoming of the training funds is their sector specific focus. The bipartite Labour Foundation also calls for more inter-sectoral cooperation of training funds (STAR, 2016). In addition, trade unions as well as employers’ organisations call for further public and private training resources which are at free disposal for individuals. In some branches, for example the metal sector, the funds issue from time to time training vouchers. These vouchers can be related to the condition that the training is not directly related to the own job. The employers’ organisations propose the introduction of a training account for each employee.

In general, the social partners do not see a problem in a lack of resources. Nevertheless, they see room for improvement. The government should, from their perspective, spend more resources to stimulate people to develop themselves further. Furthermore, in particular small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) underuse the existing possibilities. Finally, the social partners see a need for reforms of the financing of vocational schools. Currently, the incentives to shorten training courses for employees who already have received certain competencies are very low given that vocational schools receive financial support per completed course.

4.3 Information, support and guidance

The social partners try to inform their members and via the funds also their non-members about training possibilities in several ways. Important channels are newsletters or own magazines. The FNV offers

career guidance information points in all 35 labour market regions. Some *O&O fondsen* organise workshops to inform employees about training opportunities (sometimes in cooperation with in-company training facilities) and organise campaign-like ways of communication which can also focus on specific target groups. Also training centres like the *ROCs* have own information channels.

According to Cedefop (2012), the majority of adult learners in the Netherlands report wide access to information on learning possibilities (58.4 percent, highest share in EU). However, not all employees know about their possibilities and also their rights to training. For example, it is not well-known that it is possible to receive government support in training up to a Master’s degree. At the same time, it is a big challenge to reach all employees and to support them in finding the appropriate training measures for themselves.

Trade unions as well as employers’ associations see a great need for training advisors which must be situated in every region. There are already some (private) advisors active; however, there is no nationwide coverage. According to the employers’ association these advisors can be organised by the free market. Still, there should be government support in making sure that there is a nationwide availability of advisors.

Best practice: Learning Ambassadors

In a pilot project, the FNV has established with other partners so-called learning ambassadors at the work floor at Philips (a-advies, 2017). The idea stems from the UK. Learning ambassadors are employees who inform their colleagues about their training possibilities as well as about their training rights and motivate them to use them. In particular low-skilled persons often have a reservations to talk to their supervisors about their needs for training. The ambassadors overcome this hurdle. The project partners have also developed a handbook for the learning ambassadors themselves in which they find information on how to proceed.

In particular low-skilled workers are underrepresented in training. There are manifold reasons for this. One lies in the fact that low-skilled employees are often flex workers and/or face multiple problems (e.g. debts or health problems). In an ideal situation the training support would address these multiple challenges and motivate the low-skilled workers to develop themselves. The social partners see main challenges in the empowerment of low-skilled workers in employee training in financial restrictions, a lack of basic skills as well as a lack of tailored offers. They see a need to raise the awareness about the importance of training for this target group, to adapt training offers and there should be a stronger focus on enabling factors.

The trade unions have piloted a project in five regions where unemployed persons, persons in risk of unemployment as well as low-educated receive support in how to find a new job and adequate training measures.

At the same time, the funds also try to encourage companies to offer more training. Companies are sensitised for the importance of training – for their employees but as well for the company itself as it is an important means to win loyal employees, find new skilled workers and it also serves as a kind of employer branding. One main challenge is to reach SMEs. Often the employers’ organisations behind SMEs are used to inform them.

Best practice: Employment pacts and job-to-job guidance

Tata Steel, one of Europe's largest steel producers with different sites in the Netherlands, has its own employment pact in which it has committed itself to retraining employees. If jobs are eliminated and new jobs created, employees will be retrained and placed in the new positions wherever possible. If this is not possible, they receive job-to-job guidance. Thus, the employment pact focusses as well on the company's skills needs as well as on the employability of the individual employees (SER, 2016).

4.4 Contribution to quality, transparency and efficiency

For formal employee training which leads to national certificates, there are national standards. The standards are developed and monitored by the government in cooperation with the social partners and VET institutions (Ulicna/Curth, 2013). The social partners are, for example, involved in the discussion of curricula of VET schools via their presence in the board and the sectoral chambers of the *SBB*.

In general, there is a very broad public and private training offer which is not very transparent, in particular for the individual employees. The social partners are very active in informing companies and employees about the training offer. However, more could be done to improve transparency and efficiency of training by an improved coordination between training providers. This could prevent that similar training contents are developed simultaneously by different providers. To organise this efficiently, the employers' associations propose that existing structures like the boards of the *SBB* could be used for this aim. Furthermore, the universities of applied sciences could be better involved, too.

There is no nation-wide systematic approach to measure the efficiency of training. One reason for this is that employee training is very manifold and has different objectives – be it to keep up the employability, the preparation of new tasks, to accomplish individual development goals, to preserve the job satisfaction etc. Thus, efficiency of training is difficult to measure quantitatively. Most training providers as well as companies have own evaluation forms or other internal evaluation methods. In addition, employee feedback interviews are an important means which is, however, often used very ad hoc with no strategic approach. In the public sector, the exchange of good experience was introduced via an online chat box which is accessible for all employees.

4.5 Recognition and validation of competences and qualifications

The first step towards the recognition and validation of prior learning was taken in 2000 with the publication "*De Fles is Half Vol!*" ("The glass is half full!") (Duvekot, 2016). The social partners have had a crucial role in the development of the recognition process as well as in the implementation of this instrument. In 2012, the government, employers and employees have agreed in a tripartite covenant to promote the accreditation of prior learning as a labour market instrument by stimulating its usage and providing guidance tools on how to use it (STAR, 2016).

The social partners take responsibility for promoting and maintaining a high quality national system of validation of prior learning (*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties – EVC*) (Duvekot, 2016). The recognition and validation of prior learning shall improve the labour market position of employees and job seekers. It comprises all competences that individuals have gained through formal, informal or non-formal learning in various settings (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2017). *EVC* implies that competences acquired by learning on the job, in society or in voluntary work are in principle comparable to the competences acquired in formal education (Kenniscentrum EVC, 2017; STAR, 2016). The outcomes are described in a Certificate of Experience (*Ervaringscertificaat*).

There are two different paths for the validation of competences: the labour market route and the education route. The education route describes the validation against national qualifications and was the dominant approach until 2006. The labour market route was introduced later on and describes the validation of competences against sector or industry standards as well as also against national qualifications and functions mainly as a tool of career guidance (Duvekot, 2016). *EVC* via the labour market route is also a main tool for career guidance of individual employees.

In 2015, the social partners prepared a quality label for providers who issue *EVC* certificates in the labour market route to secure quality (Duvekot, 2016). The bipartite Labour Foundation has appointed an organisation to verify the quality of prior learning. For this aim, the National *EVC* Knowledge Centre (*Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC*) was introduced (Kenniscentrum *EVC*, 2017). This knowledge centre also provides information and advice for employers and employees interested in the recognition procedure (Duvekot, 2016). In the past, the Ministry of Education had also a management role in the quality control of *EVC* providers, in particular in the education route. This task has, however, faded out. Now, the social partners are responsible and the ministries of social affairs, education and economic affairs have an advisory role.

In the Dutch *EVC* system, every organisation can become an *EVC* provider, as long as they work according to the *EVC* quality code. All *EVC* providers are private organisations as intermediate organisations, sector organisations and career management organisations (Duvekot, 2016).

For employees, *EVC* can be an important means to demonstrate existing skills and qualifications. Based on this, a tailor-made training plan can be developed or changes between companies or even sectors can be facilitated. In some CLAs the right of employees to a recognition procedure as well as financial support is regulated. Sometimes also the *O&O fondsen* have regulations on the *EVC*.

In 2011, 17,900 certificates of experiences were issued. About 65 percent of the certificates were issued in the field of vocational education (*MBO*) of a certain branch or sector (Duvekot, 2016). In 2015, only 3,000 certificates were issued.

Best Practice: *EVC* as part of a career-guided trajectory

The costs for employees to get a certificate of experience can amount up to several hundred Euros. A part of these costs is tax-deductible for employers. On top of this, for example, the training fund for municipalities (*A+O fonds Gemeenten*) covers an amount of 1,000 Euro per city-worker if *EVC* is part of a career-guided trajectory (Duvekot, 2016). The training fund does also provide information about *EVC* providers (*A+O fonds Gemeenten*, 2017).

According to the social partners, the *EVC* system is under-used. Many employees do not know about this possibility and first become aware when it is almost too late, for example, when they are in danger to become unemployed or are about to change the sector. At this point, the recognition procedure is difficult to organize. In some branches, passports to document also non-formal and informal learning were introduced in order to facilitate the *EVC* procedure. For example in the carwash and gasoline stations sector, 89 percent of employees use a digital passport in which training is documented.

In particular the trade unions criticise that the government is no longer responsible for the quality assurance of *EVC* and the quality monitoring of *EVC* providers. They claim that if the government had more ownership in the process, it would also better promote the system.

With regard to the development of the *EVC* system there is always a tension between the liability of certificates and the costs for the recognition procedure. At the moment, the procedure is still very expensive. Another shortcoming of the system in its current shape is that the certificates are limited in its transferability.

Challenge: Reputation and transferability of EVC certificates

Many employees do not know about the possibilities to receive *EVC* certificates and which potential they have for the own career trajectory. Another shortcoming of the *ECV* system in its current form is that certificates issued by one institution are not automatically recognised by other institutions and are no guarantee for entry into higher education institutions.

4.6 Provision of learning

The social partners provide training via the *O&O fondsen*. Some funds have their own trainings facilities. Due to the strong influence of sectoral organisations, the provision of learning, thus, strongly depends on the sector.

The social partners can also give central impulses for the development of new training contents. In the gasoline station sector, for example, some employees had to deal with aggressive client behaviour. The responsible training fund has developed small training modules which simulate situations with customer contact and which the employees can complete using virtual reality (VR) glasses. This is just one example which also proves that new possibilities of E-Learning influence the provision of learning as it gives more freedom to learn.

Above that, the social partners are involved in the development of training contents via their participation in the Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (*SBB*). One main challenge in the provision of learning according to the social partners is that the offer of the existing training providers like for example the *ROCs* is not flexible enough for employees as there are too few part-time training offers or short time programmes. Also more practical training contents are demanded by companies as they often have to train graduates after entry into the company.

5 Conclusion

The Netherlands are a country with a strong training culture among employers and employees and the social partners have a crucial role in promoting employee training. Training is predominantly regulated via sectoral collective labour agreements (CLAs) negotiated by the social partners. CLAs often include training funds, the so-called *O&O fondsen*. The close incorporation of the social partners guarantees that the training offer is closely related to the demand of the employees. At the moment, a mind shift in training can be observed: while in the past sectoral needs were in the focus of training, individual skills needs and development goals become more and more important – in particular with regard to the rising statutory retirement age. Thereby, employees shall be responsible for themselves and proactively organise their own training. They need, however, to be facilitated to do this and be better informed about their training rights and their training possibilities. This shift of the focus towards individual training needs challenges the sectoral training funds because individual development can also imply a change of the sector. Thus, the demand for inter-sectoral cooperation between training funds is rising. The recognition of prior learning (*EVC*) is also a possibility to improve the individual career perspectives and adjust the training scheme accordingly. This instrument has been promoted in the last years. It is, however, not yet where it could be. Employees need more support in using *EVC* and certificates must become better transferrable.

Regarding the training offer, the social partners demand that the public training offer must be better adjusted to the needs of working people by offering training which is compatible with (part-time) working hours. Also, the legislation should be adapted so that employees can receive public support even though they are not following a whole programme but just individual modules.

According to the social partners, the lack of public resources or a lack of legislation is not a general obstacle to employee training. The social partners are satisfied with their possibilities and their freedom to organise training. However, more public support is demanded with respect to developing a differentiated set of validation systems and standards for recognising knowledge and experience and the outcomes of working and learning. The government should create more incentives for educational institutions to recognise prior work experience and learning and to offer personalised pathways. Also, the social partners demand that the government introduces a “skills development savings account” with tax breaks on savings set aside to pay for a skills development pathway. Furthermore, they demand more resources to offer personalised diploma- and certificate-based pathways for vulnerable groups of workers who have no or at most a level 1 or 2 secondary vocational qualification.

Even though one can say the Dutch training system is all in all in a good shape, it is time – considering the rising and faster changing training needs of employees due to global developments like the digitalisation – to make the necessary adjustments to make it future-proof.

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