



Effective
Education for
Employment



“We are heading towards competency based learning. The question is how are competencies learnt?”

The Netherlands Interview Series and Workshop

For a small country with a population of 17 million people, it is remarkable that the Netherlands is often cited as one of the world's 10 leading exporting countries with the 7th largest banking sector in the world. However, the country was hit hard by a decline in exports of almost 25% in 2009 due to the world economic crisis and the Dutch economy unexpectedly contracted 0.1% in the third quarter of 2010.

As part of the ongoing international Effective Education for Employment project, Edexcel International and Pearson Education commissioned qualitative research into the effectiveness of the Netherlands' education system with a view to better understanding key issues facing employers, policy makers, educators and learners.

This research consisted of a series of interviews with stakeholders from global corporations, those charged with rationalizing education with employment and defining the new ways of learning that will determine the success of the Dutch education system well into the 21st century.

Vital Findings

“If you look 3 or 4 years ago, we had 750 qualifications in the VE system. Now, we have reduced it to around 250.”



1. Business and industry are involved in the development of educational programmes, with some qualifications being built around specific job profiles and employer requirements.
2. There is a database of 35,000 companies who are accredited to provide experiential work-based learning.
3. Some employers are confused by the variety of qualifications held by Dutch students leaving education.
4. On-the-job training is lacking in both pedagogy and in some cases quality.
5. Lack of consistency in delivery and assessment of national qualifications is, in some cases, leading to employer disillusionment with the qualifications they helped create.
6. Cultural awareness is a key skill in a highly international Dutch society.
7. Many employers in sectors such as hospitality consider soft more important than hard skills.
8. Use of ICT in the classroom is crucial to the continued personalisation and adaptation of education.

As a small, highly productive country, the Netherlands is dependent on its ability to maintain competitiveness within foreign markets. The broad cultural mix of the Netherlands enables its citizens to work internationally, and the ability of its workforce to develop inter-cultural skills is really important in the context of both international and domestic markets.

However, employers cautioned by the events of 2009 are more wary of both the fragility of the foreign marketplace and increasing mobility within domestic job markets, factors which threaten to reduce employer investment in staff training and development. So the task of ensuring that the Dutch workforce is fully prepared with the requisite competencies for the 21st century workplace seems, increasingly, to fall on the national education system.

The importance of an employability skills focus is recognised by

“Companies should invest in helping education see how the theory works in practice. If companies do this, then they can expect to have influence over what is taught.”



many across both industry and education, and evidence of this can be seen in the introduction of a competency-based learning system in 2003. However, this system is currently voluntary, meaning that training providers are not compelled to deliver competency-based programmes, so this approach is not yet fully embedded.

This competencies focus is part of an overhaul of vocational education and training (VET) in the Netherlands which has seen 750 qualifications reduced to around 250, and organisations such as Kenniscentrum Handel charged with gathering data on how job-specific and generic competencies fit into the rationalised VET system. Significant issues around education provision and the uncertainty generated by a system in transition are leaving some students - and, by extension, some employers – less than satisfied with the end results.

“We are always trying to close the gap between what we’re doing and what the schools are doing.”

The Netherlands has a well established and comprehensive process of employer engagement in the design of vocational programmes, but the variable quality of delivery of these programmes threatens to destabilise this relationship with employers such as Hilton on the one hand while on the other, students have demonstrated about the quality of education they are receiving. Kenniscentrum Handel is responsible for ensuring that these relationships develop and remain

positive. However, Hilton is an example of a significant employer confronting this issue in a positive fashion. Hilton is becoming increasingly proactive in developing relationships with the education sector, co-authoring qualifications with educational institutions.

“I still believe that the companies who invest a lot of money in education will be the companies that people will go to.”

The structural and systemic perspectives of vocational education are not the only elements under discussion in the Netherlands. TNO Information and Communication Technology is one of the main organisations tasked with developing solutions for next generation learning and guiding national policy in this area. Solutions have to demonstrate tangible benefit not only to the education sector, but also to industry.

Continuity between formal and on-the-job education is certainly an important and connected issue. Many in the Netherlands are passionate and very positive regarding the ability of both its public and private sectors, particularly in offering an example to the rest of Europe in harnessing the potential of ICT to enrich and extend the reach of education. It may be this energy and enthusiasm that ensures the Netherlands continues to maintain its competitive edge in a turbulent and ever changing global marketplace.

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