



Effective Education for Employment: The Netherlands Interview Series

Rob van Wezel and Pasqualino Mare

Rob van Wezel and Pasqualino Mare work for Kenniscentrum Handel (KCH), an organisation which sits between employers, industry and education providers in order to define qualifications and standards and assist in the delivery of apprenticeships and traineeships. Rob van Wezel manages international projects and Rob van Wezel leads on competency-based learning, and both are well placed to analyse a vocational system in transition.

This interview offers a genuine insight into both the strengths and weaknesses of the vocational educational system in the Netherlands.



"...We translate professional occupation descriptions into competencies, knowledge and skills for that job. And it works."

Key Findings

- The Netherlands has begun the process of implementing a framework of competency-based learning throughout its vocational programme.
- Industry has great influence over the definition of the competencies within this framework.
- The number of vocational qualifications has been vastly reduced in recent years as part of a major rationalisation process.
- The Netherlands allows for significant local interpretation of the qualifications, competencies and profiles which has in part been the cause of extreme variations in quality of education provision.
- Improving standards and consistency in the quality of education provision is evidently the next hurdle to overcome in the evolution of Dutch vocational education.



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Employer engagement is at the core of education design:

If you look at how qualifications are developed in the Netherlands, employers are very much involved in the process. We have committees who go into great detail to define the job profiles, the standards and the competencies. That structure is very much integrated.

This engagement is comprehensive:

If you look at different committees there is a good representation from all types of businesses including small businesses and SMEs. The structures exist for all stakeholders to have influence on this process.

There are issues around the complexity of the education system in the Netherlands:

[In the Netherlands, you can find] four different systems of education for teaching a shop assistant but all shops want the same thing. This can be a challenge for employers.

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

There has been a major overhaul of the vocational education system in the Netherlands:

If you look 3 or 4 years ago, we had 750 qualifications in the VE system. Now, we have reduced it to around 250. The criticism was that there was too much detail and not enough space for mobility of skills for the individual.

Vocational education needs re-focussing:

The balance [needs to be] between very specific outcomes and very general outcomes.

“The key problem is the provision of training and the interpretation of how training is delivered.”

Qualifications are linked to specific job profiles:

We developed, for example, a general description for a sales assistant. In the end, the supermarket then adds its own profile [to augment this]. The qualifications are updated every year. The labour market has a voice – professional profiles are all based on information from industry.

There are issues around the delivery of competence based learning:

We are heading towards competency based learning. The question is how is this stuff learnt? In the start there is a standard professional description but at the end, the system of competency based learning is not delivered in a practical way.

In some instances, employers are losing faith in the ability of the qualifications they helped to create to deliver work ready graduates:

Diversity of material is an issue. Diversity of assessment is also a problem. Education is based on the same qualification but the education itself is different.

A coordinated response is underway:

There is a move towards a more centralised assessment and that will improve standards.