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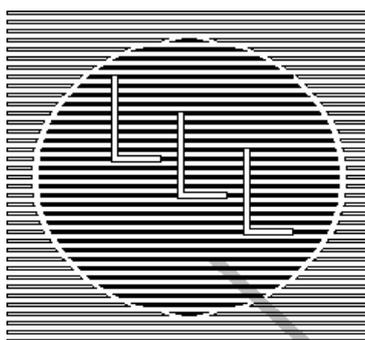


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DIRECTION DE L'ÉDUCATION
DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION

Kenniscentrum
Beroepsonderwijs
Arbeidsmarkt

The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning



Background Report for the Netherlands

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OECD-project
‘The role of qualification systems in
promoting life long learning’

Country Report: The Netherlands

Ben Hövels
with cooperation by
Geert Kraayvanger and Mariska Roelofs

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Knowledge Centre for Vocational Training & Labour Market
(Kenniscentrum Beroepsonderwijs Arbeidsmarkt,
e-mail: b.hovels@kenniscentrum-ba.nl)

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Chapter 0 – Background and context

0.1 Introduction

Education and training systems contain both incentives and disincentives for individuals to learn. These incentives and disincentives also influence the quality and the distribution of learning within societies. Qualifications systems are amongst the factors that influence learning.

In October 2000 the OECD Education Committee and Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee endorsed a new activity on the role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning. The activity is designed to investigate both how different national qualifications systems influence the patterns and quality of lifelong learning within countries, and what actions within qualifications systems countries can take to promote lifelong learning. It investigates the experiences countries have in designing and managing qualifications systems and attempts to identify the impact of different approaches and innovations on learning activity and outcomes. Its purpose is to enlighten policy discussions and to develop policy options for the role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning. A key problem for the OECD-activity is: *Can different national qualifications systems characteristics be shown to have an impact upon learning behaviours amongst national populations and sections of populations?*

Country background reports are one of the several components of the OECD-activity. Other components include both thematic workgroups and specialist studies into particular aspects of qualifications systems and life long learning, country-consultations, co-operative activities with other international organisations that are examining qualification arrangements, the preparation of a synthesis report, and meetings of national and organisational representatives and experts.

By working together within the common framework of the OECD activity it is intended that countries will learn from each others experiences. Therefore after various meetings of national representatives and experts in 2001 and 2002 the OECD secretariat has developed a set of guidelines for the country background reports upon the basis of the outcomes of those meetings (OECD, 2002). The structure of this report is largely following the OECD-guidelines.

The present report contains the country background report for the Netherlands as a contribution to the OECD-project. In the next chapters of this background country report these guidelines of the OECD-secretariat are followed as much as possible and appropriated for the Dutch situation.

The central question in the background country report is *to identify aspects of the Dutch qualifications system that have an impact both upon formal learning and upon non-formal and informal learning*. According to the OECD-guidelines and following the recent paper by Mike Coles (Coles, 2003), ‘qualifications systems include all aspects of a country’s activity that result in the delivery or recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link the labour market to education and training. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualification system may be an explicit framework of qualifications’ (Coles, 2003).

The intention of the report is not to provide an exhaustive description of the national qualifications system in the Netherlands, but rather to describe and analyze a number of structural features of the qualifications system, especially focussing on the role of qualification structures in promoting life long learning. The concept of qualification structure is used as synonymous to what Coles is calling ‘an explicit framework of qualifications’. In accordance with the OECD-guidelines only the qualifications system at the level of upper secondary and tertiary education should be considered in the background country-reports. It has been agreed that the Dutch country report will especially focus on upper secondary vocational education and training (VET), whereas its potential or actual linkages both to tertiary vocational education and preparatory secondary vocational education as well as to post-initial training will be described too.

In other words, this country report contains an in-depth-approach, *focussing on the role of secondary vocational education and training (VET) and especially its qualification structure* rather than a global one that includes all qualifications at the level of upper secondary education and beyond.

0.2 New legislation on adult education and upper secondary VET

Since January 1996 in the Netherlands new legislation on education and vocational training on upper secondary level is implemented, the Adult Education and Vocational Training Act (WEB). This act has the intention to make the whole – until then largely scattered – area of initial vocational education and adult education more coherent, both by bringing together and streamlining various tracks and levels within secondary vocational education/training and between secondary vocational education and adult education.

Above all this new legislation is the consequence of various developments in Dutch policies towards VET at upper secondary level since the beginning of the eighties, striving towards the following goals:

- . A withholding role for the government and more involvement of ‘social partners’ at central and at branch-level: in order to give more influence and a greater responsibility to significant labour-market-parties.
- . Integration of the school-based track (mbo) and the dual-based track (apprenticeship) into one harmonized VET-system, also within the same schools to offer courses and learning routes, depending on the requirements of the labour-market as well as on the abilities and willingness of students¹.
- . More autonomy to relevant actors at local level, namely educational institutions/ schools, and the enhancement of their own policy-potentials: in order to emphasize the responsiveness of educational institutions at local level and their responsibility to find a proper position in significant network-building i.e. local infrastructures.
- . The guarantee of a minimum of practice-learning for all VET-pathways (with a minimum of 20% for each course): both to smooth the transition from school to work and to acquire qualifications and competences which can not or can hardly be gained at school.
- . A uniform national qualification-structure, with global educational targets which are determined (together by social partners and the educational field) at central level and with some space for local actors to fill in: in order to provide for qualifications with ‘nation-wide civil value’ and more transparency in the supply of qualifications and courses. At the same time some ($\pm 20\%$) space is given to schools for specifications of courses-contents according to local and regional needs.

0.3 Current situation of upper secondary VET

The current situation regarding the institutional dimension in the area of upper secondary VET can be characterized by highlighting the following main points:

- firstly, a national qualification structure is developed by (nowadays) 19 National Bodies for Vocational Education (LOB’s) – nowadays they call themselves Knowledge Centres for VET and Industry (KBB’s) – which are organized by sector, involve representatives from social partners and vocational schools and are responsible both for qualifications and attainment targets of the dual as well as the school-based part of VET;
- secondly, these qualifications should be independent on the learning route. Two learning routes distinguished, a dual based one (bbl) and a school based one (bol);
- thirdly, the government laid down a set of criteria, which all national qualifications have to meet, and established the Education and Labour Market Advisory Committee (ACOA) to advise on national qualifications and to monitor compliance;

1 In the Netherlands the initial VET-system consisted at that time of two separate subsystems, parallel to each other: a school based one (mbo) and a work or dual based one (apprenticeship). The school-based subsystem was far dominating, both regarding to the number of pupils and its status. Besides the integration of the two VET-tracks (from than on: bol resp. bbl), (general and basic) education for adults should also be included within the same schools.

- fourthly, social partners in each sector are responsible for setting up ‘occupational (competence) profiles’ and – within the national bodies – social partners with representatives of the schools have a common responsibility for setting and filling up qualifications per branch, including attainment targets;
- finally, vocational schools (ROC’s) have to base their curricula largely on these national qualifications with about a fifth of the curriculum being set according to local needs.

The present institutional structure of upper secondary VET can be summarized as follows.

Overview of actors and responsibilities within upper secondary VET

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Central national level: | |
| <i>Actors</i> | <i>Responsibilities</i> |
| Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences (OC&W) | Setting the framework of criteria for initial VET (principle of selective flexibility) |
| Advisory Committee Education and the Labour Market (ACOA) | Advising on national qualifications towards LOB’s |
| Sectoral national level: | |
| <i>Actors</i> | <i>Responsibilities</i> |
| Social partners per branch/sector | Setting up occupational profiles (including updating) |
| National bodies per branch/sector | Setting up national qualifications and attainment targets (a.o. principle of triple qualification) |
| Regional/local level | |
| <i>Actors</i> | <i>Responsibilities</i> |
| Regional Vocational Training Colleges (ROC’s) | Shaping curricula (contents largely led by national qualifications) and learning pathways |

Concerning the national qualification structure, there are many challenges for further development and improvement. One of the main issues is what the essence of national qualifications should be regarding both (developments in) the labour market and occupations and wishes of the educational field. In 1999, ACOA prepared recommendations on how occupational competence profiles might be drawn up by social partners in different sectors as well as on the nature of qualifications as these should be formulated and filled up with attainment-targets. The government had asked for these recommendations because the issue of introducing key qualifications into VET had been raised by the Social-Economic Council (SER) and the Educational Council (Onderwijsraad).

ACOA recommended the shaping of these ‘formats’ according to the concept of core-problems and core competencies (ACOA, 1999). Core competencies are defined as the abilities of individuals to tackle adequately the core problems of an occupation. Core competencies are multi-dimensionally structured. Its main dimensions are globally defined as:

- professional/craftsmanship and methodical competencies;
- managerial/organisational and strategic competencies;
- social-communicative and normative-cultural competencies;
- learning and shaping competencies.

ACOA advised that uniform formats for constructing occupational competence profiles should be used as a basis for establishing qualifications, including attainment targets. There had not previously been a standard format for drafting occupational competency profiles. Standard criteria for the drafting of occupational competency profiles are assumed to be necessary to satisfy the need for transparency and also because it is recognised that the quality of qualifications is strongly influenced by the quality of the underlying occupational competency profiles.

Up to now many efforts have been made towards strengthening the qualification structure – most recently in proposals by the umbrella organization of national bodies (COLO) – whereby at least a common basis of core-competencies is recommended, which should also lead to a substantial reduction of the number of qualifications until at maximum 300 (at present there are more than 700 qualifications). However, some elements of the new qualification structure are still in discussion both with the umbrella organization of ROC's (BVE-raad) as well as within Colo, and with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. It is expected that a design for the new qualification structure will be finished soon and in 2006 the first students can stream in upper secondary VET which is reconstructed on the basis of the new qualification structure. Meanwhile initiatives are launched to diminish institutional/intersectoral barriers too, aiming at the construction of broader – competency based – qualifications and strengthening cooperation between national bodies. Above all – paralleling these changes – processes of redesigning VET – courses by schools are launched, focussing at competence-steered learning. Later on we will elaborate on the new competence based qualificationstructure (cfr. for an up-to-date state of the restructuringproces: Colo, 2004; see also: www.colo.nl).

Chapter 1 – Qualification systems and structures

The Dutch VET-system at upper secondary level is supposed to function according to the principle of ‘joint responsibility’ by state, educational field and trade and industry.

The whole structure seems to fit well within the neo-corporatist tradition in the Netherlands. The state creates frameworks, but within those frameworks it encourages the parties involved to adopt self-regulation. An effort is made to incorporate elements of decentralisation and ‘customer-oriented thinking’ into an institutional framework, which is largely settled at national level. The national qualification structure seems to be the expression of it, at least as far as contents of VET are involved. Within this framework educational institutions are supposed to operate relatively autonomous in supplying for tailor-made flexible learning pathways. In other words: a system of checks and balances. Of course a major question is how the whole system is functioning in practice.

Later on we will elaborate on that. In this chapter we explain the main institutional features of the system. First of all the main institutional (par. 1.1), followed by the qualification structure and its different levels (par. 1.2). After that main structures and mechanisms for recognition of learning (par. 1.3) and quality-assurance (par. 1.4).

1.1 Institutional layers of VET

As a consequence the new Adult Education and Vocational Education Act is – as far as vocational education and training are concerned – based on three main institutional layers: a) the concentration of available courses in – nearly fifty – *Regional Vocational Colleges (ROCs)*, and b) the creation of nineteen National Bodies for Vocational Education (LOBs²) in which both education and trade and industry are represented and which have to play a central role in developing and maintaining a national system of qualifications, and c) a national system of qualifications covering all vocational training programmes within the initial VET-system.

1.1.1 The first layer: regional colleges for vocational education and training as suppliers of learning processes

The first layer of the new administrative framework for vocational education is the concentration of the available courses in big educational institutions, the so called Regional Vocational Colleges (ROCs). In a ROC the old institutions for the various types of vocational education and adult education in a region are merged into one single administrative and organisational unit. These new institutions include colleges of intermediate vocational education (mbo’s), schools for part-time instruction as part of the apprenticeship training route (district schools), schools for basic adult education and daytime/evening education etc. Within the framework of the policy of decentralisation, these institutions have a relatively great measure of administrative and financial autonomy. ROCs are considered to have a variety of advantages. Combining various types of education and expertise makes it easier than before to provide tailor-made programmes for specific groups of students. It also is supporting to have the advantage of being able to better take into account the wishes and needs of regional trade and industry. It is the intention, that the ROCs should become the ‘spin in the web’ of significant regional actors for example, by making common learning arrangements with local trade and industry. This should provide for practice-places, and ROC’s should participate actively in the market for training courses. At the same time ROC’s are considered – if they want to be financed by government – to direct their regular courses and curricula largely at qualifications as these are defined at national level. In principle they are fully autonomous in the didactical-pedagogical shaping of the educational and training process.

2 Although since June 2002 they are calling themselves Knowledge Centres for VET and Industry (KBB’s), in this report the old name is used.

1.1.2 The second layer: national bodies for vocational education and training as constructors of qualifications

A key element in this whole institutional framework is the process of determining qualifications and educational goals. This process illustrates the relationship between the parties involved in the field of vocational education (state, educational sector, and trade and industry). The ‘shared responsibility’ which has been advocated is expressed in the system of consultative and collaborative bodies (per sector) within which representatives of education and industry meet to define national qualifications: the *National Bodies for Vocational Education and training* (LOB’s/KBB’s).

After an independent advisory committee (ACOA) has checked whether the qualifications meet a global framework of criteria, they are then adopted by the Ministry of Education Culture and Sciences and become part of a Central Register for vocational Education, that contains all officially recognized qualifications (Crebo). In principle both public and private training institutions can offer courses that respond to these qualifications. However, not many private institutions actually do so.

Above all the national bodies have the legal task both to care for sufficient practice-places and to accredit practice-places on quality. Lastly it should be mentioned that the national bodies can also have a task in examinations, in so far as they operate in the process of ‘external verification/legitimation’ of the school-based examinations. Until now the schools are legally obliged to legitimate a proportion of 51% of their examinations by an external body. The national bodies are officially recognized as such. The Central Register for Vocational Education (crebo) also clarifies which examination institutes are accredited to provide ‘external verifications’ of the school-based examinations.

1.1.3 The third layer: a national qualification structure as a communication structure between demand and supply

The *national system of qualifications* consists of the structure and profile of all ‘qualifications’ for which secondary vocational education should prepare. These qualifications – in other words, occupational entities for which vocational training is required – are organised both on the basis of the *occupational areas* to which they are related and the *level of occupational practice* which they aim for. The core elements of the qualification structure are learning targets as these are laid down per qualification. The national qualification structure offers the legal framework of VET-contents within which educational institutions have to operate.

The qualification structure is intended to be an effective instrument of communication between education and labour-market. Both the demands of trade and industry, of schools and of the society as a whole on graduating in secondary vocational education should be clearly stated, and the structure should be transparent. Up to now in upper secondary vocational education four different *levels* of qualification are distinguished, covering at this moment over 700 qualifications. Each qualification has been elaborated into sets of education attainment targets, specifying knowledge and skills, and is mostly structured in partial qualifications.

The state offers a global frame of criteria according to which LOB’s should develop and hold up-to-date national qualifications. The main principle of this global frame is called ‘*selective flexibility*’. It refers to broad, lasting and future-oriented vocational qualifications which enables graduates to be flexible on the labour-market and should prepare them for a life long learning too.

An important requirement of the qualification structure is the so-called *triple qualification*. Qualifications are obliged to include a threefold content: programmes therefore not only have to provide students with the necessary professional skills for entering the labour market, but they also have to create the base for further education and training and – thirdly – they have to equip participants with social and cultural skills needed to function as a member of both the social organization of companies and of society as a whole. Clearly in this context the aspects that are directed to learning (further education and training) are especially of relevance.

1.2 VET-qualification structure and qualifications

The Adult Education and Vocational Education and Training Act (WEB) introduces a four-level qualification framework of qualifications in upper secondary VET.

The objective of the new framework was to have a simple and coherent framework with qualifications each divided into units or partial qualifications. For each of these partial qualifications one receives a certificate. Though only after having obtained all certificates one has a right to obtain a full diploma. Certificates are not meant to have a currency on the labour market. Each partial qualification is being accredited, making it possible for learners to switch easily from one VET-course to another at the same or at another level. Above all partial qualifications are still valid when people return to VET after having left the educational process for some years. During those years they may for example still have been active on the labour market. As such they are meant as 'building stones' that could be used in promoting life long learning.

Levels in the Dutch qualification framework

| | |
|----------|---------------------------------|
| level 1: | assistant |
| level 2: | basic skilled worker |
| level 3: | all round professional worker |
| level 4: | middle-management or specialist |

Qualificational levels should represent the levels of occupational practice³ and are assumed to be distinguishable by three criteria: *responsibility* (degree in which occupational actions have consequences for the fulfilment of occupational practices executed by others), *complexity* (degree in which occupational practice is based on standard procedures), and *transfer* (degree in which occupational practice can be applied in a variety of occupational situations). At the end it is up to national bodies (LOB's) to identify the level of qualifications.

The levels are formally described in the following way.

Level 1 Assistant

The worker is responsible for the execution of his own work. The work consists primarily of the application of automated routines and only to a limited extent the application of standard procedures. It involves job-related skills and knowledge.

Level 2 Skilled worker

The worker is responsible for the execution of his own work. In addition there is a collective, cooperative responsibility in the work whereby co-operation with colleagues takes place. The work consists of applying automated routines and standard procedures. It involves occupation-related skills and knowledge.

³ The classification of qualifications is assumed not to be derived from educational structures. The Ministry of Education proposed that a link to the European SEDOC five-level framework should be established. The SEDOC classification and the description of the SEDOC levels are however derived from levels in education. It is a training based qualification. The Dutch classification implicitly assumes that the hierarchy in levels of VET represents a corresponding hierarchy in occupational practice. The Dutch descriptions of levels are problematic (Westerhuis, 2001). One of its consequences is that national bodies (LOB's) interpret standards, qualifications and levels differently. In some sectors both qualifications and partial qualifications are defined in terms of occupations and qualifications are allocated to a level using occupation related criteria. In some other sectors these are defined in terms of education related criteria. Most sectors are mixing up both sets of descriptors and definitions (Westerhuis 2001).

Level 3 All round professional worker

The worker is responsible for the execution of his own work and must also account for his actions towards colleagues (non-hierarchical). In addition he bears explicit and hierarchical responsibility: monitoring and supervising automated routines and standard procedures. The work comprises standard procedures and combines or devises procedures, in the light of work preparation and supervisory activities. It involves for the most part occupational skills and knowledge.

Level 4 Middle management or specialist

The worker is responsible for the execution of his own work and must also account for his actions towards colleagues (non-hierarchical). In addition he bears explicit hierarchical responsibility; this responsibility concerns planning and/or administration and/or management and/or development of the whole production cycle. Furthermore he combines procedures or decides on new ones. It involves specialist skills and knowledge and/or occupation-independent skills and knowledge.

In the four level framework the level of basic skilled worker, level 2 is considered as the minimum qualification level every person should have to reach (cfr. the idea of a starting-qualification for every one). Everyone should be entering the labour markets as a basic skilled worker. Education at this level is aiming at acquiring the skills needed to person somewhat complicated routines and standard procedures. The workers' responsibilities are limited to his/her specific job position.

Level 1 (assistant) is new in the qualification framework. It was created to allow learners, unable to acquire a level 2 qualification to enter the labour market with a diploma.

Despite politic rhetoric's claiming level 2 to be the absolute minimum, apparently trade and industry need qualified employees at this level. Above all the formal introduction of level I also meant that the realisation of a starting qualification for everyone, is actually considered as not being fully realistic. Compared to the skilled worker, the assistant will perform less complicated work.

Each sector represented by a national body (LOB) does have its own qualifications at different levels. Above all coherency is assumed between the various sectors. From a lifelong learning point of view it is important to notice that both transparency and traditional opportunities are strived for, in a vertical sense (between different levels) as well as in a horizontal sense (between different sectors).

The following figure shows the total number of qualifications in 2003. As is mentioned before, the number of qualifications is one of the issues in discussions nowadays about strengthening the qualification structure.

Figure 1.1 – Overview of the number of qualifications in 2003

| level | name of the level | qualifications |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | assistant | 55 |
| 2 | basic skilled worker | 215 |
| 3 | all round professional worker | 224 |
| 4 | middle-management | 180 |
| 4 | specialist | 55 |
| Total number of qualifications | | 729 |

The idea behind the qualification structure is that it should not only be used to express the sector's education policy for initial VET but should also be used for policymaking in continuous vocational education and training and for the assessment of prior learning (APL). See also later on in this chapter.

The qualification structure is supposed to function as an institutionalised interface at national level between labour market and vocational education. The basic idea behind the national qualification structure is rather simple and implies commitment of all relevant parties in the field. Following the 'Royal way': social part-

ners per sector are responsible for the construction of occupational profiles. Social partners together with the educational field (a common responsibility!) translate these occupational profiles into qualificational profiles, that is to say into qualifications and attainment targets. As mentioned above this occurs by the national bodies wherein both parties – both social partners and educational field – are represented. Educational institutions (ROC's) are responsible for the pedagogical-didactical shaping of the educational process and learning pathways, if possible in close cooperation with relevant other local actors (namely firms and local employment offices). As mentioned before, the latter have to focus by law $\pm 80\%$ of their curriculum at the attainment targets of national qualifications, whereas $\pm 20\%$ can be spend in favour of regional/local needs. Roc's are supposed to offer all types – both dual-based learning routes (bbl) and school-based ones (bol) – and levels of VET, including adult education in the public domain (ve).

1.3 Recognition of learning

Non-formal learning is achieved by an organized program or instruction. Informal learning is achieved outside of an organized program, by learning in work settings, at home, in leisure time, etc.

1.3.1 Recognition of formal learning

Schools (ROC's) assess by means of examinations whether a participant complies with the knowledge, skills and professional attitude, required for a particular vocational programme. Examinations for vocational courses are in the form of continuous assessments. These assessments demonstrate whether a partial unit in the programme has been successfully concluded. Obtaining a partial qualification entitles the participant to a certificate. Once all partial qualifications and the placement are concluded satisfactorily, the course participant receives a diploma.

Colleges are responsible for examination and certification. The Adult & Vocational Education Act (WEB) requires that colleges carefully arrange the organisation and development of examinations, and to lay down the relevant procedures in education and examination regulations.

The Education Inspectorate each year assesses the content and level of the examinations, in a number of vocational programmes and at a number of schools. In its annual examination report, the Inspectorate lists the schools evaluated and their results in full detail.

In order to guarantee the societal value ('civil effect') of the certificates, the WEB requires that colleges subject 51 percent of the part-qualifications as identified by the Minister to an independent, external assessment. This means that an independent and approved examining body must state in advance that the content and level of the examinations to be held complied with the relevant attainment targets, and that the examination procedures are correct and in accordance with the statutory requirements.

Recently, this system of external legitimation is left to a newly established national Centre for quality of examinations (Kwaliteitscentrum Examinering – KCE). This national centre has to set up standards for the quality of examinations. It is up to so called sectoral platforms to elaborate and operationalize these standards. The sectoral platforms have a bipartite composition: 50% representatives from the educational field and 50% representatives from national bodies (lob's). The Centre for quality of examinations (KCE) have to give its approval to the products and services for examination by the schools.

Above all the national bodies for vocational training collate information about the comparability of qualifications obtained in the Netherlands and abroad. They also provide information about the recognition of professional qualifications in vocational education within the European Union. The purpose of this activity is to facilitate access within the European Union to professions for which a specific national certificate is required. Together with the International Diploma Comparison Department of Colo, the national bodies carry out international diploma comparison for vocational education.

1.3.2 Recognition of non-formal and informal learning

A great deal of attention has been given the last few years increasing the opportunities for assessing and recognising competencies which have been acquired previously and/or outside the traditional educational frameworks. This may entail the accreditation of diploma's or certificates or granting exemptions from parts of a regular vocational training course.

In 2001 the National Knowledge Centre APL (Kenniscentrum EVC) is established by Dutch government, supported by social partners. The major goal of the Centre is to stimulate both the development and use of a system for the accreditation of prior and non-formal learning in the Netherlands within the context of human resource development on the labour market (Duvekot, 2002).

Because recognition of informal and non-formal learning can make a significant contribution to people's employability. Various institutions within VET (a.o. national bodies) are developing instruments for this purpose. Individual knowledge, skills and attitudes (competencies) are compared with standards taken from the qualification structure. Procedures and instruments have been put in place for various occupations and training courses to support the development of tests of proficiency, portfolios and the appraisal of results.

Monitoring of the use of APL systems in the Netherlands shows that the supply of APL-instruments is strongly increased from 2000 tot 2002. However despite its growing popularity, APL as a system is still very much in a phase of development up to now. In general APL-applications do have often still the character of projects within schools, firms or branches (Hövels en Romijn, 2002).

1.4 Quality assurance

The law (WEB) requires ROC's to establish and maintain a system of quality assurance. This system is aimed at ensuring conscious and systematic quality assurance. It encourages institutions to reconsider and re-evaluate their functioning, and to regularly formulate and monitor the targets set. In addition, it requires institutions to involve independent experts in quality assurance, and where possible, co-operate with other institutions.

In establishing the system, the institutions have a large degree of freedom. However, the system should be functional, and an institutions must be able to demonstrate this fact to the outside world, at least in the four areas subject to statutory provisions by the government:

- multiple qualification: for the labour market, for further learning and for citizenship;
- accessibility for vulnerable target groups;
- efficient learning routes;
- good advice, guidance and information provisions.

In these four areas, the institution must report on:

- the objectives set;
- the results achieved;
- the discrepancies between objectives set and results achieved;
- actions undertaken to ensure improvement.

Every two years, each college accounts for its activities by publishing a fully open quality assurance report, describing the structure and results of its quality assurance process. The report must indicate how quality assurance is implemented within all layers of the institution, and who is responsible for this process. This may include such matters as:

- personnel policy;
- development of new programmes;
- organisational structure;

- system management;
- assessment of learning results;
- decisions taken on continuity/discontinuity of programmes based on labour market information.

ROC's submit their account in writing to central government, by submitting their quality assurance report to the Education Inspectorate. If the Inspectorate identifies a quality problem in a particular college, consultation is arranged, and the college is given a reasonable opportunity to improve. If these efforts are without result, the Minister may issue a formal warning, and as a final step, withdraw certain rights (the right to award certificates, and the right to financial support).

As a result of the increased autonomy, quality assurance has been an increasingly important issue for the ROC's. They are developing instruments and strategies to integrate quality assurance into regular educational management. In 1999 the Education Inspectorate made a start on Integrated Institutional Supervision (*Integraal Instellingstoezicht*). This is geared towards analysing institutions with regard to a number of quality characteristics, such as the accessibility and efficiency of the primary process. An important item for attention is the quality of the examination process, of which, there is a great deal of criticism. The aim is to strengthen external legitimation. This will be achieved by the establishing of the Centre for quality of examinations (KCE).

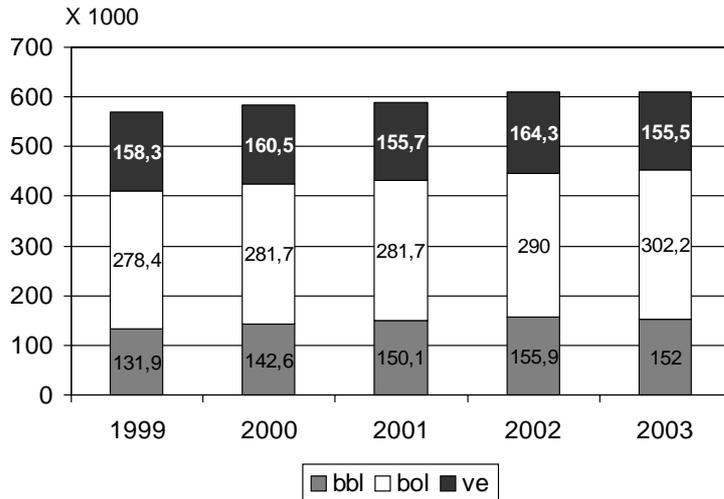
Considerable attention has also been devoted to quality with respect to practical vocational training (BPV). All the national bodies now have a scheme for the accreditation of firms providing work-place training, in which the quality of the practical training is monitored on the basis of a number of criteria, such as the content of the work and the presence of a trained supervisor.

Chapter 2 – Participation rates in VET and connected subsystems

2.1 Participation in VET

Figure 2.1.A shows the number of students in upper secondary VET from 1999 until 2003, specifying for the dual based learning route (bbl) and the school-based learning route (bol) within mbo, as well as for adult education as far as it is in the public domain and is supplies for by ROC's (ve).

Figure 2.1.A – Number of students in mbo and ve¹

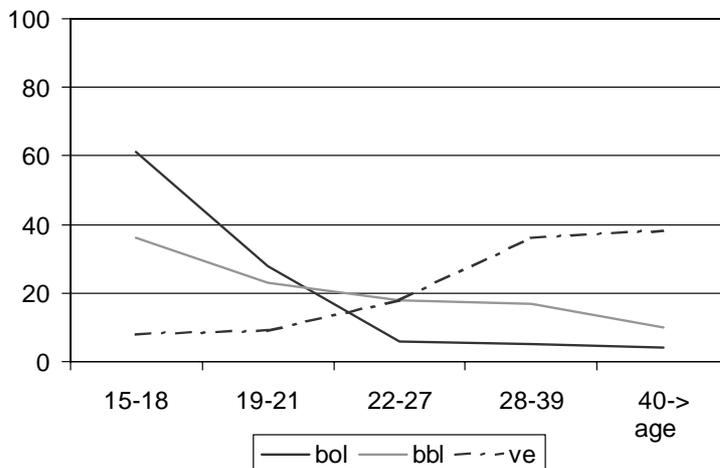


1) Minus mbo in agriculture (in 2003: 23.5)
Source: Ministerie OCenW (2004).

Mbo and ve together counts almost 610.000 students in 2003. The overall-number of students has grown the last few years, namely due to the raise within both bbl (until 2002) and bol.

From a Life Long Learning point of view it is relevant to notice the distribution of students by age. Figure 2.1.B shows the percentages of various age-categories within bol, bbl and ve.

Figure 2.1.B – Distribution by age (2001-2002)



Source: Bve Raad, 2003.

Evidently, students in ve are at average the older ones, most of them following courses at the lowest levels (personal/social skills or self-reliance whether learning Dutch as a second language). Within mbo students in bbl are older than students in bol. Figure 2.1.B clearly demonstrates that the *bol* full-time trajectory is overwhelmingly attended by relatively young participants coming straight from school. This is the case in all sectors and applies to both young men and women. This is less the case with the *bbl* dual-based trajectory which is also followed by many who are returning to training and do not come straight from school. This indicates the potential significance of bbl for the realisation of lifelong learning for older adults.

Summarizing the trend is that participation in mbo has increased, namely due to a raise in bbl-students. Also the number of ve-students has increased, probably due to higher participation by ethnic minorities. From a point of view of LLL it should be noticed that both ve and bbl contain relatively the oldest age-categories.

Focussing at mbo levels and learning routes within mbo, figure 2.1.C shows the number of students who received a qualification (diploma) during the last few years at each of the mbo-levels, specifying for bbl, bol (full-time route) and bol (part-time route).

Figure 2.1.C – Number of mbo-diploma's

| Number of diploma's (x 1000) | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| total | 104,5 | 100,4 | 106,3 | 108,1 | 112,8 | 120,4 | 120,7 | 123,1 |
| bbl | 33,1 | 33,8 | 38,1 | 36,5 | 42,9 | 46,3 | 54,3 | 54,7 |
| level 1-2 diploma's | 19,7 | 20,9 | 20,5 | 19,3 | 22,2 | 24,3 | 28,7 | 28,4 |
| level 3-4 diploma's | 13,5 | 12,9 | 17,6 | 17,2 | 20,8 | 22,0 | 25,5 | 26,3 |
| bol (full-time) | 65,6 | 61,3 | 64,5 | 67,2 | 65,7 | 69,8 | 62,8 | 64,5 |
| level 1-2 diploma's | 12,3 | 11,7 | 13,8 | 14,8 | 16,0 | 16,4 | 16,2 | 17,0 |
| level 3-4 diploma's | 53,3 | 49,6 | 50,7 | 52,3 | 49,8 | 53,5 | 46,6 | 47,5 |
| bol (part-time) | 5,7 | 5,3 | 3,8 | 4,5 | 4,1 | 4,2 | 3,6 | 3,9 |
| level 1-2 diploma's | - | - | 0,0 | 0,2 | 0,5 | 0,7 | 0,8 | 1,1 |
| level 3-4 diploma's | 5,7 | 5,3 | 3,7 | 4,3 | 3,7 | 3,5 | 2,8 | 2,8 |

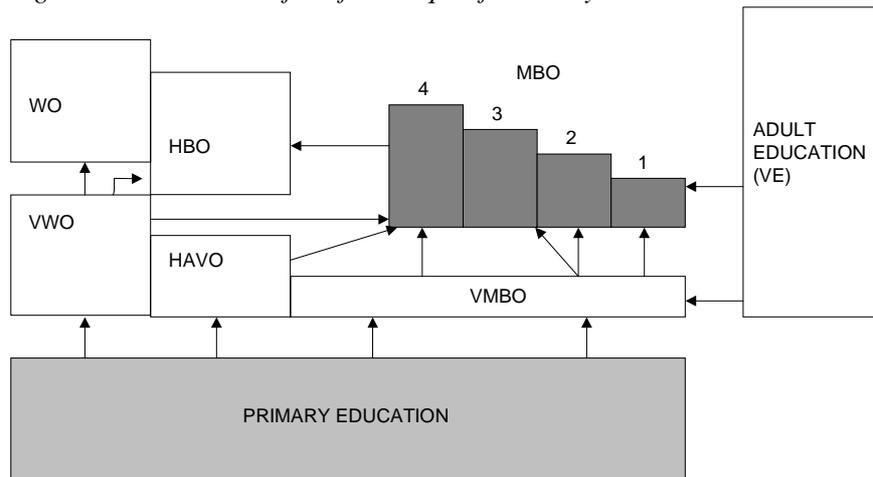
Source: Min. OC&W (2004).

The figure shows that students from the dual based learning route (bbl) get by far more often qualifications at a lower level than students from the school-based learning route (bol). However, the number of qualifications in bbl at level 3-4 has grown during the last few years.

2.2 Delivering and receiving subsystems

Despite focussing in this report on VET (upper secondary vocational education), it is also important to indicate shortly its position in the formal qualification system as a whole. The figure below sketches this position in a schematic way, including transition opportunities both from and towards upper secondary VET.

Figure 2.2 – Overview of the formal qualification system



Legenda:

- mbo: upper secondary vocational education
- vmbo: preparatory vocational education
- hbo: higher vocational/professional education
- vwo/havo: upper secondary general education
- wo: university education
- ve: adult education (in the public domain)

2.2.1 Lower secondary (pre-)vocational education (vmbo)

VMBO is indeed the most important entrance to upper secondary VET, whereby – by law – upper secondary VET does not have entry-requirements at levels 1 or 2. In 2000 mbo had about 150.000 new students, mostly from vmbo.

Nevertheless recently for the first time national examinations are introduced in VMBO. Therefore it can be expected that the number of VET-students without a formal VMBO-diploma will increase in the next few years.

Till 1999 lower secondary (pre-)vocational education (VBO) was part of general secondary education in the Netherlands. The name suggests that this type of school covers vocational education. This was, however, hardly the case anymore. The first two years (out of four) were devoted to general subjects, while in the last two years – in combination with general subjects – lessons were given in vocationally oriented subjects. With the lower secondary pre-vocational education certificate, pupils could go on to the apprenticeship system and/or school-based upper secondary vocational education.

Since 1999 VBO and lower Secondary General Education (MAVO) are merged into VMBO. VMBO has been organised in four learning tracks, ranging from full time theoretical till full time practice based training.

Main reasons to introduce these new learning tracks were:

- to offer a recognisable/transparent and coherent system
- to ameliorate orientation towards and fit with upper secondary education
- to avoid interrupted learning pathways from the two funding years into the two upper years.

All tracks are preparing for Secondary Vocational Education (mbo), because VMBO is not seen as the end of somebody's initial education pathway. In 2001 the streaming by diplomed vbo and mavo-studens into mbo was 0,74 (Stoas, 2003).

2.2.2 Tertiary (or higher) vocational/professional education (hbo)

Students with a mbo-qualification level 4 or (under certain conditions) level 3 are allowed to stream towards hbo. In 2000, almost 36 percent of students with a mbo-diploma level 4 (and level 3) did so. In 2001 the streaming by level-diplomed mbo-students into hbo was 0.53 (Stoas, 2003). It has to be mentioned that almost all of these students had followed within mbo the school-based learning route (bol).

Tertiary (or higher) professional education (hbo) is part of higher education, the other part being university education (wo). Usually higher professional education is regarded as a part of the Dutch VET structure as it is – like upper secondary vocational education – in fact preparing its students for an occupational career. Higher professional education is preparing most of the students directly for the labour market; some 20% of the graduates chooses for follow-up courses in University or ‘post-hbo’.

Students in higher professional education are coming either from upper secondary general (Vwo/Havo) or from upper secondary VET. Especially, graduates at level 4 of the qualification structure are allowed to enter professional education. If they are choosing courses in the same sector/specialization as finished in upper secondary VET, then they can finish higher professional education within three years instead of the normal four years.

Higher professional education provides programmes at one level (level 5) only, be it in various sectors. Although one coherent qualification structure for professional education does not exist, institutes for higher professional education agreed to define school-based curricula on national profiles and a curriculum which is common at 70%. At this very moment higher professional education is going to introduce a bachelor-master structure, and most of the schools did already implement it in practice.

2.3 Starting qualification and drop-out

During the period 1995 until 1999 the proportion of young people of 15-25 years old in the Netherlands without a starting qualification⁴ declined from 20% until 18% (cfr. Geerligs a.o., 2002).

Taking the ‘starting qualification’ is a point of reference, compared with the mean dropout-rate in OECD the proportion of early school-leavers in the Netherlands is relatively low. However, compared with other OECD-countries in western Europe its drop-out-rate is relatively high. Figure 2.3 shows comparative of young people without a starting qualification, who are not in education any more.

Figure 2.3 – Percentage of young people not in education, without a starting qualification

| | 15-19 years old | 20-24 years old |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Netherlands | 8.4 | 17.3 |
| Germany | 5.9 | 14.4 |
| Denmark | 9.5 | 11.4 |
| Sweden | 4.3 | 8.5 |
| United Kingdom | 7.2 | 6.9 |
| mean OECD | 11.3 | 19.1 |

Source: OECD (2002), Early school-leavers: development work (concept, Paris (derived from: Werkgroep IBO, 2002).

Focussing at upper secondary VET, it must be mentioned that dropout-rates in mbo are high. Each school year about 12% of the students are leaving mbo without a diploma. Given a mean of three-years-courses this means that as a consequence more than one third of each cohort does finish mbo without a diploma.

4 Internationally a starting qualification is marked as a qualification at ISCED 3-level, equivalent to mbo level 2.

24 percent of the early school-leavers mentions the content of the courses as the main reason for dropping out of mbo, 22 percent mentions that the level of the courses is too heavy for them, and 9 percent mentions pull-factors on the labour market (Onderwijsinspectie, 2001). Especially in case of early leavers from level 1+2, dropout seem to be strongly due to both motivational factors and an insufficient fit between contents/heaviness of the courses and wishes/capacities of students (Werkgroep IBO, 2002). By the way, it must be said that reliable and valide cohort-data on success or failure in mbo are lacking.

The raise of streaming through from mbo towards hbo during the nineties, did not enhance the dropout-rates within hbo. Nevertheless about 15% of those who enter hbo from mbo, is leaving hbo without a diploma (Stuurgroep evaluatie WEB, 2001). This percentage is comparable with the proportion of early leavers who streamed in hbo from havo.

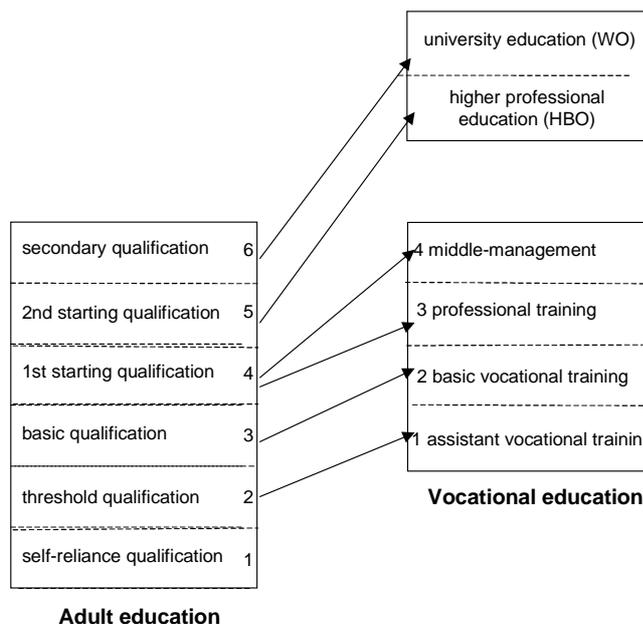
2.4 Adult education and training

Figure 2.2 shows also the position of adult education (ve) within the formal system. First of all we'll elaborate its position a little bit more. There after we shortly sketch the position of (non-formal) continuous vocational training.

2.4.1 Adult education in the public domain (ve)

As mentioned by the new legislation on adult education and upper secondary vocational education (WEB) the Dutch system of adult education in the public domain is – at least in a formal sense – highly integrated with the VET-system at secondary level. First of all this occurred by the major merging operation of both VET-courses and adult-education courses in the same educational institutions (ROC's). assuming that this would stimulate flexible transitions between VET and adult education. Secondly, an own – six level – qualification framework for adult education is created.

The table below shows formal entrance-opportunities from various levels of adult education into both qualification levels in upper secondary VET and into higher professions education and university education.



Source: Ministerie van OC&W

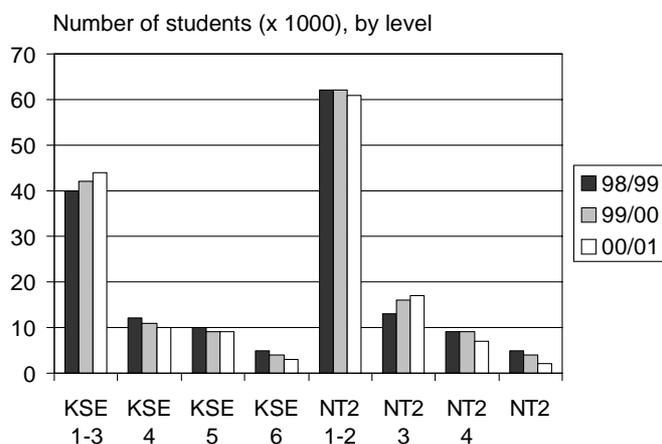
Because ROC's are offering both vocational courses (mbo) and public courses for adults (ve), participation in ve is sketched already in par. 2.1. However, from the point of view of LLL, it is important to elaborate a bit further on ve.

Unlike vocational education, adult education in the public domain (ve) is not concerned with qualifying people for a particular occupation. It's goal is to provide a solid basis for entering both general and vocational education, as well as to learn people how to function in society. Adult education (ve) offers four types of programmes and six levels:

- secondary general education (ve-levels 4-5-6): adult participants may obtain full or partial diploma's, that are identical to those set out by the Secondary Education Act for initial general education,
- programmes focusing on personal and social skills,
- programmes focusing on self-reliance,
- Dutch as a second language.

Above, connections between the qualification structure for VET and ve are shown. Ve-levels 1-3 are the lowest levels, directed at basic education.

Figure 2.4 – Participation in ve



Legenda

- KSE = general and basic adult-education
- NT2 = Dutch as a second language

It is difficult to get a valid picture of both the seize of the potential target group and developments in participation in ve. Nevertheless statistics show that during the nineties the number of participants in general education (mavo, havo, vwo-level) drastically decreased (from 78.000 in 1992-'93 towards 27.000 in 1998-'99), while the number of participants in 'Dutch as a second language' increased (from 20.000 in 1993-'94 towards 42.000 in 1998-'99).

2.4.2 Continuous vocational training in the private domain

The private system for adult education mostly used to be known as continuous vocational training, directed at the employed whether the unemployed parts of the working force.

So far as it pertains training for employed people the system is highly market-lead. Courses are provided by private (training) firms whether by regular educational institutions (like ROC's) on a contracting basis. However, the part taken of this training market by ROC's is still relatively small (Honingh, 2002). Above all ROC's can compete on the training market for the unemployed too, because they have by law also the opportunity to offer (paid) courses on contract. In most cases both employment-services and municipalities are entitled to allocate financial means for it.

Besides branch- or firm-specific certificates a coherent diploma or qualification structure for continuous vocational training does not exist, unless these courses do correspond to requirements of formal recognized qualifications. This is hardly ever the case.

It should be mentioned that – namely in the area of continuous vocational training for employed – in many sectors/branches training funds (in total over 100) are functioning. Most of them are filled up with a certain proportion of the wage-sum in the sector or branch by Collective Labour Agreement. These funds are meant both to equalize training costs for individual firms and to stimulate participation in training. In principle they provide important mechanisms for promoting of life long learning, at least for the employed. As a consequence a variety of initiatives is launched by training funds to stimulate further training, be it or not combined with (pilots into) recognizing prior learning (e.g. in the metal-electronic industry and the house-painter-branche) (cfr. Waterreus, 2002; Serail a.o, 2002).

Further on initiative on experiments with individual learning accounts launched by Dutch government i.c. the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science should be mentioned. A recent evaluation study shows among others that both individual persons and firms were sufficiently interested in those experiments: the planned number of participants in the experiments were actually realized. Above all the outcomes have been rather promising. The experiments showed for example that an individual learning account is very motivating, also for lower educated people, both to plan their own learning to and take responsibility for it (cfr. Geertsma a.o., 2004).

2.5 Participation by adults in education and training

The demand-side of education and training in terms of lifelong learning, is expressed in the patterns of participation by adults in education and training across the life-span.

It is not easy to get a clear and reliable picture of participation by adults in education and training, mainly due both to different definitions and different survey-designs. As a consequence the available figures differ too.

Figures both based on participation by the total 25 years old population and based on measurement at the moment of survey itself, show in 2000 15.6% as a participationrate. While figures based based on participation only by employees count (in 1999) for 41% (cfr. SER, 2002; CBS, 2004). By the way figures derived from the OSA-panel point at a participationrate of 33% in 2000, which is lower than figures derived from CBS (OSA, 2003). (Differences due to varying definitions).

Taking the CBS-figures as a point of departure the participation rate in education and training by adult Dutch employees is 44% for men and 35% for women.

Clearly, men are participating more often in education and training than women. The some counts for differences between categories along other criteria. Higher educated are participating more than lower educated, young employees more than older ones, employees in big enterprises more than employees in SME, autochtones more than alloctones (ethnic minorities). Above all employed people are more participating in education and training than unemployed ones (SER, 2002).

During the nineties, the participationrate by employees has increased (Houtkoop, 2001). This could be explained by the strong economic growth in this period. However it can be assumed that the increase is not only due to conjunctural factors. It seems plausible that the institutional embedment of training in collective labour agreements and trainingfunds has played an important role too (SER, 2002).

Taken as a whole, Hake and Van der Kamp (2001) conclude that current levels of participation by adults in education and training are seriously skewed towards younger adults and against the older generation. With regard to the male-female variable, sex seems to be a factor in participation among older working adults

with more men participating than women. Among the younger generation of adults sex-based determination of participation would appear to be less significant. Younger women are more likely than older women to be active in the labour market and this probably explains higher levels of participation by women in the younger cohorts. There is here the cross-cutting influence of work and non-work as an explanatory variable. Those in work are in general more likely to participate in education and training in all ages cohorts, but this is significantly lower among older workers.

'However, the level of initial education remains the most potent among explanatory variables in determining levels of participation in education and training across the generations. This adds strength to the so-called 'accumulation hypothesis' (Tuijnman, 1989) to the effect that the quantity and quality of education and training already acquired is a major determinant of participation in later periods of life. When the variable of ethnic origin is introduced into the equation it is clear that members of the ethnic minorities possess lower levels of initial education and as a consequence lower levels of participation in adult education and training' (Hake and Van der Kamp, 2001).

The Netherlands performs well among the OECD countries with 79.8% of all 18-year-olds involved in some form of full-time education and training, with almost 40% entering higher education. However, while levels of participation in secondary vocational education and training are comparatively high in the Netherlands there are significantly high and worrying levels of non-completion, as we saw before.

From this point of view it is especially stressed that the ones without a starting qualification are at risk (cf. SER, 2002). Therefore early schoolleaving is a big problem.

A starting qualification is seen as the absolute minimum for a successful learning-career: both intensity and quality of post-initial learning is largely dependent on an the initial basis, including learning competencies (cfr. also Onerwijsead, 2003).

Chapter 3 – The impact of qualification systems

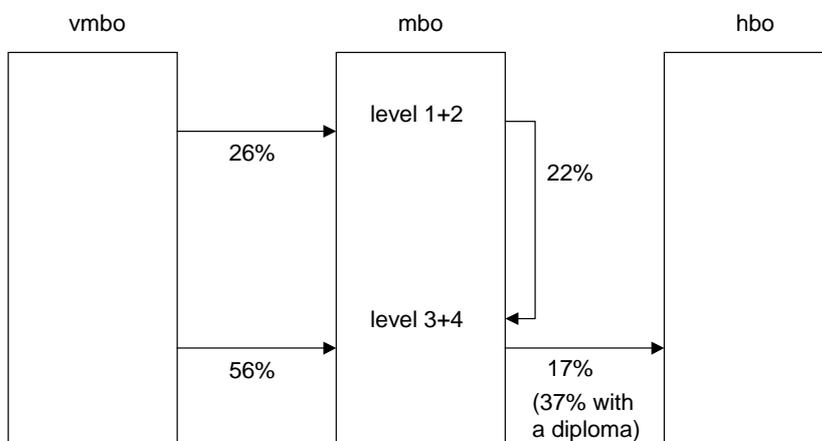
In this chapter evidence of the impact of qualifications systems upon learning is identified, namely on the basis of current statistical data, reviews and evaluations that have been completed.

3.1 Streaming within the ‘vocational column’

Figure 3.1 shows the streaming of individuals (or vertical transfer) within formal vocational education from vmbo to mbo, and from mbo to hbo. Nowadays in the Netherlands it is called ‘streaming in the vocational column’.

Figure 3.1 – Streaming within vocational education: with and without a diploma (2000)

Percentages of the outstream



Source: Min. OC&W (2001).

It should be noticed that the figure contains both students with and without a diploma. In appendix 1 the figure is elaborated for the year 1999, according to a.o. specifications by diploma and by yes or no staying in the educational system.

Appendix 1 shows e.g. that 82% of the vmbo-students is streaming into mbo (26% at level 1-2), and (56% at level 3-4), while 8% is leaving vmbo directly into the labour market.

After introduction of the new legislation (WEB) in 1996, the proportion of vmbo-leavers that was streaming directly into the labour market decreased from about 9% into 7% (Stuurgroep Evaluatie WEB, 2001). Despite declining age-cohorts (due to demographic developments), especially the streams from vmbo into mbo-levels 1+2 have increased. However, especially older students within vmbo as well as vmbo-students from ethnic minorities (allochtones) are a group at risk, having a bigger chance to leave directly into the labour market.

Within mbo 23% is streaming from the lower levels (1+2) into higher levels (3+4), while 53% is leaving the lower mbo-levels directly into the labour market and 62% is leaving the higher mbo-levels directly into the labour market.

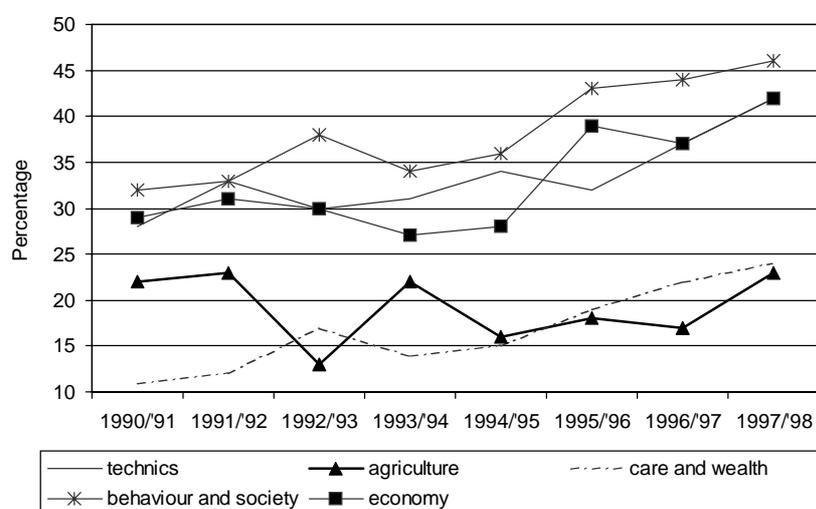
While 18% of all mbo-leavers is streaming into hbo, 37% of mbo-leavers with a diploma at level 3 or 4 do so. Almost all of the latter category are from the school-based learning route (bol). In practice mbo-students from the dual-based learning route (bbi) are hardly streaming towards hbo, due a.o. to the lack of level 4 – qualifications in the dual-based learning route.

At the reverse it should be realized that recently hardly 25% of all students who are streaming into hbo, came from mbo: in 2003-2003 about 20.000 of all first year-students in hbo (80.000) came from mbo, while almost 32.000 came from havo (CBS, derived from Baarda, a.o., 2003). However in this respect big differences exist according to sector. The hbo-sector of technics is receiving far more students from mbo (about 37%, that means almost equal to receiving students from havo) than other hbo-sectors do.

The stream from mbo 3+4 towards hbo has strongly increased during the nineties, from \pm 25% in 1991 towards 39% in 1998.

Figure 3.2 shows that this happened for students from all sectors within mbo, except agriculture. Above all this figure again shows big differences among mbo-sectors. Clearly, students from 'behaviour and society' mbo-sectors stream relatively at most towards hbo.

Figure 3.2 – Streams of students from mbo into hbo



Source: Geerligs, J. a.o. (2002).

Recent figures show that 51% of all mbo-instream in hbo do have a hbo-diploma after five years, while this is 47% of all havo-instream in hbo. Especially instream from technical mbo-sectors are relatively successful in hbo (Source: Het hbo ontcijferd, 2003).

3.2 Position on the labour market with and without a starting qualification

A recent overview of the position of 15-22 years old shows that two third of all 15-22 years old is still in the educational system, while almost one third is on the labour market be it or not having a starting qualification (Figure 3.3). Of those who are employed (410.000) about 42% do not have a starting qualification. Of those who are unemployed (39.000), 56% do not have one.

As a consequence it can be concluded that a starting qualification seems to enhance job-chances. Meanwhile it should be recognized that a considerable part of those without a starting qualification actually have a job.

Figure 3.3 below shows the distribution of 15-22 years old people by position on the labour market, specified for those with and those without a starting qualification.

Figure 3.3 – Position on the labour market of 15-22 years old (2002)



Source: Plan van aanpak jeugdwerkloosheid, 2003.

Generally a starting qualification is seen as a minimum for functioning in a rapid changing labour market and to arrive at a appropriate occupational and learning career. Therefore a starting qualification is for every one an important goal in Dutch policies.

However, some nuances can be made. First of all part of the young people without a starting qualification did get a qualification at a lower (vmbo or mbo-1 level), and so they have at least any qualification.

Secondly, it is not only the formal system which can provide for qualifications. In principle it is possible that by work-experiences knowledge and skills are acquired, which could be recognized by APL-proceedings (Werkgroep IBO, 2002).

To offer information on the actual labour market position of various qualificational levels, figure 3.3.A shows both the unemployment rates and the ‘flexible-contract’-rates of people 18 months after school leaving. Apparently, unemployment of vmbo-graduates is not higher than of mbo-graduates. It is remarkable that unemployment rates among bol 1-2-graduates is even higher than among vmbo-graduates. Contrarily, for bbl-graduates it is easier to find a job, probably due to being already in a job during the learning route.

Also regarding the stability of their jobs, vmbo-graduates don’t differ too much. The percentage of vmbo-graduates with ‘flexible contracts’ is comparable with the one of bol-graduates.

By the way it should be mentioned that wo- and hbo-graduates have by far most often flexible contracts.

Figure 3.3.A – Percentages of unemployment and percentages with flexible contracts, by level and learning route (2002)

| | % unemployment | % flexible contract |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|
| <i>vmbo</i> | 3.0 | 22.7 |
| <i>mbo</i> | 8.2 | 15.6 |
| . bol level 1+2 | 8.2 | 24.9 |
| . bbl level 1+2 | 2.4 | 15.0 |
| . bol level 3+4 | 4.0 | 20.1 |
| . bbl level 3+4 | 1.0 | 5.6 |
| <i>hbo</i> | 3.2 | 30.5 |
| <i>wo</i> | 2.7 | 49.7 |

Source: ROA (2003).

3.3 Pecuniary benefits of qualifications

Of the graduates who left school about 18 months previously, vmbo-graduates have the lowest hourly wage. A vocational qualification (of mbo) returns almost double the wages of a qualification of vmbo, as figure 3.4 shows. Despite age-differences between vmbo-leavers and mbo-leavers, wage-differences between vmbo and mbo-level 1+2 are remarkable. Dual-based learning routes within mbo (bbl) yields relatively the highest wages. Apparently employers value work experiences which bbl-students have gained during their learning route. Probably age-differences between bol- and bbl-leavers are playing a role too. Investigations more in depth show that bol-leavers are rather rapidly make up the earnings during their career. Going on to do higher vocational/professional education produces a further increase, but this increase is less than in the step from vmbo to mbo.

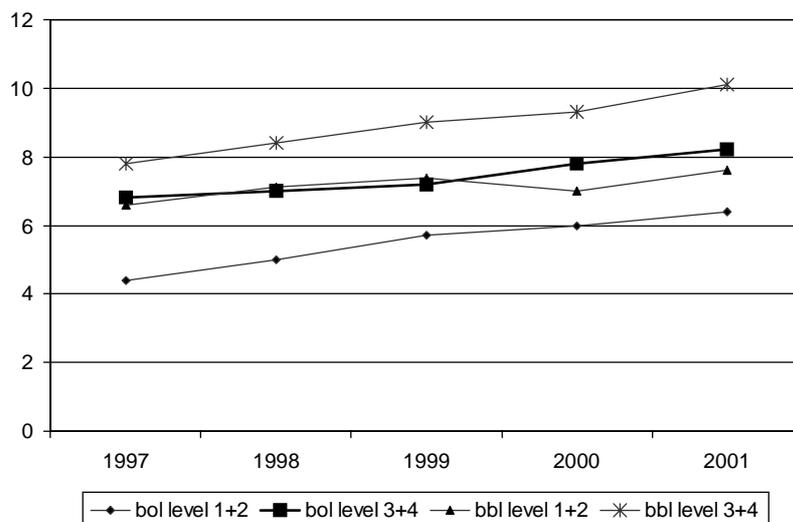
Figure 3.4 – Hourly wages (bruto) of school leavers in 2002 by qualificational level and by learning route

| | bruto-wage (Euro) |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| <i>vmbo</i> | 4.42 |
| <i>mbo</i> | 8.52 |
| . bol level 1+2 | 6.78 |
| . bbl level 1+2 | 8.07 |
| . bol level 3+4 | 8.37 |
| . bbl level 3+4 | 10.22 |
| <i>hbo</i> | 11.86 |
| <i>wo</i> | 13.85 |

Source: ROA (2003).

Focussing at different qualificational levels within mbo, figure 3.5 shows how the bruto hourly wages have developed since 1997. Clearly, mbo-leavers earned in 2002 about 30% more than in 1997. The year 2001 shows the largest increase, due to both scarcity on the Dutch labour market and raising inflation.

Figure 3.5 – Hourly wages (bruto) of mbo-leavers from 1997-2001, by level and by learning route



Source: Eijs, P. van (2002).

Lastly it should be mentioned that differences not only exist between both various levels and various learning routes. The educational sector is relevant too. Generally, those who have a technical qualification are better rewarded than other ones; the same counts – more or less for leavers from health and care-sector. Leavers from both economic and agriculture sectors get the lowest wages (Eijs, P. van, 2002).

3.4 Non-pecuniary rewards for qualifications

Although both their the unemployment-rates and the ‘flexible contract’-rates don’t differ so much with graduates at mbo-levels, the pecuniary benefits in terms of wages of vmbo-graduates certainly do.

Figure 3.6 – Percentages with a job below level and with a job where no specific type of education is required

| Education sector type required (%) | Lowel level required (%) | No specific type required (%) |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>vmbo</i> | 31 | 41 |
| Agriculture | 26 | 48 |
| Technical | 33 | 28 |
| Economics | 30 | 69 |
| Health Care | 20 | 47 |
| <i>mbo-level 3+4 School-based route (bol)</i> | 21 | 21 |
| Agriculture | 33 | 29 |
| Technical | 17 | 15 |
| Economics | 21 | 28 |
| Health Care | 23 | 15 |
| Behaviour and Society | 21 | 20 |
| <i>mbo level 3+4 Dual-based route (bbl)</i> | 41 | 19 |
| Technical | 62 | 20 |
| Economics | 51 | 37 |
| Health Care | 22 | 11 |
| Behaviour and Society | 34 | 17 |
| <i>hbo</i> | 20 | 19 |
| Agriculture | 25 | 18 |
| Teaching | 11 | 10 |
| Technical | 15 | 16 |
| Economics | 21 | 31 |
| Health Care | 18 | 5 |
| Behaviour and Society | 34 | 17 |
| Art and Culture | 33 | 17 |

Source: H. Heijke (2001).

Figure 3.6 shows some more characteristics of the quality of work, by level by learning route and educational sector. Unfortunately data on mbo-levels 1+2 are lacking.

The knowledge and skills acquired by graduates are not being fully utilised. Underutilisation is particularly high after vmbo and after dual based mbo (bbl). For hbo and mbo-bol underutilisation is lowest, with an average of 20%. Under utilisation also varies according to learning route.

It is very low at the mbo-level for those who have taken a technical education following the bol-route (17%), but very high for those who have taken a bbl-route in the technical or economic sector (62% and 51%, respectively)⁵.

⁵ The researchers are afraid that many school-leavers from the apprenticeship system who stayed on with their respective employers after graduating took the education level required during their studies as the reference level (Heijke, 2001).

A large part of the graduates from vmbo (41%) end up in jobs where no specific type of education is required. If we add this to the fact that many of them also work below their level of education, it can be assumed that this is unskilled labour. At the mbo-3+4 and higher levels, the percentage of graduates who work in jobs for which no specific type of education is required is half as big, or approximately 20%. There are also differences between the education sectors with respect to this indicator of under valuation of education. At the mbo-level, especially those with an agricultural or economic/administrative education get jobs where the type of education is irrelevant. This effect is smallest among those who took a technical, health care or behaviour and society education, regardless of the learning route (Heijke, 2001).

It should be mentioned that in general mbo-leavers tell 18 months after school leaving, that they are satisfied with their present situation as well as with the education and training they got. More than three-quarter of them would choose for the same education/training again, and only 20% is looking for another job (Van Eijs, 2002). Mbo-leavers from levels 3+4 are most satisfied, while mbo-leavers from levels 1+2 – especially the bol-learning route – are less.

Summarizing, it can be concluded that the relative position on the labour market of vmbo-graduates compared with mbo-bol 1+2 is not so bad at all, except regarding the pecuniary benefits (ROA, 2003). Nevertheless some questions remain. Despite the figure mentioned above suggests that many of them are in unskilled jobs – although the comparison with bol 1+2 not could be made -, sharp evidence on the quality of work in terms of contents is lacking. Perhaps that school leavers without a starting qualification actually do have less challenging jobs. And perhaps that school leavers without a starting qualification do have a job with very limited opportunities towards selfdevelopment and learning, whereby their position on the labour market in the longer term is vulnerable.

However, a recent research report from ROA is doubting this, stating that school leavers without a starting qualification will really have good labour market perspectives in the longer term (ROA, 2003, p. 54).

3.5 The value of a starting qualification

At the same time indepth-analyses into the value of a starting qualification by authors of the same research-institute, show sharply demarcations on the basis of six indicators between vmbo-level, mbo-level 1, mbo-level 2 and mbo-level 3, specified by learning route.

Figure 3.7 summarizes the demarcations between qualificational levels which offer a relatively good start on the labour market. Demarcations are determined by the existence of discontinuities in the relationship between the length of education/training and returns to profits.

Figure 3.7 – Critical demarcations between qualificational levels, offering a good start on the labour market on the basis of six indicators

| <i>Indicators</i> | <i>bol</i> | <i>bbl</i> |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| . chance on participation in further education | vmbo-level 1 | vmbo-level 1 |
| . chance on employment | vmbo-level 1 | level 1- level 2 |
| . chance on stable job | level 2 – level 3 | vmbo-level 1 |
| . occupational level | level 1 – level 2 | level 2 – level 3 |
| . chance on job in own direction | level 2 – level 3 | level 1 – level 2 |
| . hourly wage | vmbo-level 1 | vmbo-level 1 |

Source: Van der Velden R., a.o. (2003).

Differentiating for each of those indicators for the labourmarketposition, the critical demarcation between qualificational levels is examined.

It is concluded that on the basis of these six indicators – not for all of them – level 2 generates relatively good profits on the labour market. For some indicators level 1 compared with vmbo is already rather profitable. Therefore on the basis of empirical evidence, in general level 2 seems rather adequate as a starting qualification.

However, the authors mention that the outcomes are based on the labour market situation of Dutch school leavers at the end of 1999 and 2000, which was in the Netherlands a period of economic growth. Therefore it is possible that the returns to education have risen as well as demarcations on what is valued on the labour market have decreased. Maybe in period of economic fall these demarcations would shift again to higher educational levels.

A recent study on the value of a starting qualification on the basis of both national and international comparisons concludes that the Dutch starting qualification results in good chances on the labourmarket. Above all the quality and intensity of courses directed to a starting qualification produce a rather high level of general competencies. As a consequence the authors suggest to reconsider the classification of the Dutch starting qualification on ISCED level 3C short (Houtkoop a.o., 2004). However, at the same time especially related to reintegrationpractices of for unemployed, it is shown that the meaning of the startingqualification as a policy-concept is often regarded as less useful in practice of reintegration (Warmerdam a.o, 1999).

Chapter 4 – Pressures and initiatives

4.1 Major pressures for changes and innovations

Qualification systems should be considered in a dynamic sense, taking into account the factors that have influenced changes and innovations within qualification systems and the factors that are likely to influence change in the future. Particularly these factors include the demands for lifelong learning.

Following the director of the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning office (SCP), from a sociological point of view five key developments can be distinguished which will determine the character of the 21st century. He called those the five 'big I's' (Schnabel, 2001):

- *Internationalization*, which is physically symbolised by processes of both tourism and migration and closely linked with economic liberalisation and globalization.
- *Individualization*, which means the ongoing process both of less dependency of the individual on his or her direct environment, and of increasing freedom to shape one's own life. This does not mean that there is not a need for common experiences and regulations. On the contrary, collective experiences and regulations are desired, in so far as these are at the service of the individual.
- *Informalization*, as a form of de-institutionalising organisations and ways of organising things, as these had developed in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Organisations in the 21st century will become flatter, and will more and more acquire the character of networks, which in many respects are of a virtual nature. Both individualization and informalization fit well together and are supposed to be reinforced by processes of informalization.
- *Informatization*, technological developments will increasingly get an open informalised nature. The meaning of information will change, while a fitting selection of information becoming more important than just its availability. This will also have tremendous consequences on the meaning of knowledge and the role of learning.
- *Intensification*, refers to the changing dynamics and increasing role of experiences in modern life. Experiences of work, relationships and life are being influenced more and more by the desire to intensify feelings and experiences.

Focussing at the relationship between learning at the one hand and work and labour market at the other, it should be mentioned that since the seventies Dutch policies have gradually changed from a 'social(in)equality'-approach towards a 'matching'-approach, where optimization of the match between learning and work is in the centre.

Both in this policy-context, and taking the five big i's as a point of departure from a macro-societal point of view, fundamental changes are occurring in the relationship between learning and work too.

Below some key-issues are mentioned which illustrate its fundamental consequences for changes in the relationship between work and learning. They seem also to point at changing paradigm's which will have consequences for qualifications systems in particular from a life long learning point of view (Hövels a.o, 2002).

Developments in character of work: complexity and diversity

Due to developments in both its external and internal environment, work and organization of work appear to change drastically. First of all a certain tendency can be discerned towards broadening of occupational profiles by integrating in jobs both so called 'key-skills' (problem solving abilities, social-communicative skills, etc.) as well as interdisciplinary elements. As a consequence traditional distinctions between work-related and general skills are becoming less sharp, and demarcations of branches and occupations are increasingly under pressure too. Above all sharp definitions of occupational profiles meant as external, labour market-driven frames of references for contents and shaping of vocational education and training, are increasingly under discussion. As far as broadening-tendencies appear in the reality of work and labour market, the consequence will be that at the one hand the labour market will require new types of skills, while at the other hand it is supposed that opportunities to acquire skills in work itself will be enhanced.

Despite the fact that broadening is generally occurring and also is emphasized in VET- and employment policies, the reality of work and labour market is more complicated than often is presumed by policymakers. Empirical research shows first of all big differences between branches and companies. It is increasingly recognized that in practice actually 'the labour market' does not exist as well as that changes in work and work- organization clearly are more complicated than sometimes is supposed. An illustration of the latter is an outcome of a recent research in the Netherlands which shows that broadening of occupational profiles is in practice going hand in hand with specialization in the same jobs (Den Boer en Hövels, 1999). Furtheron research until now shows that linear relationships between the organization of work and the organization of learning do not exist. The influence of other variables, a.o. orientations and strategies of actors involved – like employees themselves, managers, etc. – seems to make these relationship rather diffuse and complicated (Poell and Van der Krogt, 2000).

Towards a 'knowledge economy': growing relevance of (applied) knowledge

It is expected that most of our societies are more and more developing from an industry-based into a service- and *knowledge based economy*. Knowledge appears to become the new basic resource in economies, wherein knowledge-productivity contains more surplus-value than traditional production-factors like capital, raw materials or (physical) labour. Scientists like Drucker (1993), Giddens (1994) and Castells (1998) mention many reasons why the traditional economy of physical goods, capital and labour will be substituted by a knowledge-based economy. Knowledge and learning are increasingly becoming a crucial factor in both economy and society (cfr. Hövels, 2003). Above all *the meaning of knowledge* is changing too. A growing service-sector, a decreasing contribution of physical labour, accelerating processes of collective engineering, and the information and communication technology that is present everywhere, are among others indicators especially for the increasing importance of *applied knowledge* (Kessels, 2001).

It is not only knowledge in itself which is gaining dominance; the essential part is *how to cope with knowledge*: how to transfer and how to use knowledge. Knowledge arises in interaction and becomes valuable by the ability how to act; it needs to be understood as the potential for action that does not only depend upon the stored information but also on the individual interacting with it.

In a knowledge-economy, specific competence-based knowledge will become more important than the classical scientific knowledge which is structured according to disciplines. Both applying knowledge and acting in practice seem to become very important sources for generating knowledge. In fact, particularly *interaction between education, learning and economic life* seems to become increasingly important (Hövels, 2003).

Popularity of the concept of competencies

Influenced by social-constructivistic approaches on learning the dominant idea is that at individual level knowledge and skills of a more general character only can develop on the basis of concrete experiences in specific contexts: the construction of knowledge takes place by both reflection and abstraction from a number of concrete and personally experienced situations. As a consequence the *concept of competencies is gaining popularity*. This points to the third issue. Knowledge becomes valuable by the ability how to act, by the ability to use it, by competencies. Competencies make knowledge an instrument for an infinite number of applications. A knowledge economy is supposed to float on competencies. Competencies are referred to not only insights, but also creativity, flexibility, and abilities to anticipate, communicate and convince. Transforming into a knowledge economy the concept of competencies is becoming more and more popular.

Actually competencies are in general defined in a rather multi-interpretable way, partly dependent on different societal contexts where the concept is used.

Related to the Dutch context, four key-features of competencies are stressed (Hövels a.o, 2000):

- a. its *action-orientation*. Keyword: problem solving abilities;
- b. its *holistic-individual orientation*. Keyword: abilities of an individual as an authentic person;
- c. its *dynamic orientation*. Keyword: permanent learning and development of competencies;
- d. its *integrative nature*. Keyword: integration of cognitive, attitude and skill elements.

These key-features of competencies refer all to the space that learners and/or workers have to develop competencies within their action situations as well as to opportunities for learners/workers to actively steering their own development (cfr. Kwakman, 1999). From this point of view competencies are both the main motive to integrate learning and work, as well as standing in the middle of integrated learning-work arrangements.

Competencies are distinguished from the concept of qualifications. While qualifications refer to formally recognized clusters of knowledge, attitudes and skills, which are both defined at a collective level and are supposed to have ‘civil effect’, competencies refer to actual contents. The growing popularity of competencies emphasizes the necessity of competence-based qualifications. So, it is changing the qualification system itself too, by substituting tradition ways of examination and qualification by, more competence based ways, like new forms of assessments, practice-oriented proofs of ability, and so on.

Changing paradigm's on the relationship between learning and work

The developments mentioned above are changing the traditional functions of knowledge related to both contents (*what* to learn) and the learning processes themselves (*how* to learn). They do so in close interaction with features of the knowledge economy. Above all the role of institutions is changing, looking for fitting mutual balances between (interests of) at least three poles: the individual, education and training, and labour market (Hövels, 2002).

Summarizing, a shift in paradigm's on the relationship between learning and work is going on, which can be located at least in four different spheres.

First of all sharply demarcated and rigid defined concepts of both occupations and functions are becoming obsolete as points of reference for learning. Instead concepts of employability, flexibility of individuals and career-directed competencies come in. It is also one of the forces explaining the growing popularity of the competency-concept.

Secondly, traditional concepts of labour market are being redefined towards less traditional ones, e.g. emphasizing during ... time changing combinations in the pattern of working, learning caring and leisure. From this point of view the concept of the ‘transitional labour market’ is coming up, whereby transitions are focus-points in the relationship between working, learning and living (cfr. de Koning a.o, 2003). This shift is going hand in hand with the increasing diversity among the population in terms of opportunities, life-circumstances and wishes.

Thirdly, points of reference for the level of policy making are changing whereby the role of authorities at national level – i.c. the state – is decreasing in favour of both global/ international and local/regional levels. Globalization tendencies are going hand in hand with more attention for the intimate, expressing itself in growing contacts and networking in the relationship between learning and work at the ‘locus’: glocalization.

Fourthly, a repositioning of the role of institutional actors in the relationship between learning and work is going on, whereby private actors are gaining importance. The role of public authorities in the relationship between learning and work is shifting towards a facilitating one, creating space both for autonomous citizens and entrepreneurship, and for associations wherein citizens organize themselves. At the same time it means a more emphasis on the role of private actors in both policy-making and learning, be it or not in new arrangements with public ones.

Both developments and shifting paradigm's are partly signals of a changing society, partly launched by common policies of national government and social partners. Together they shape the socio-economic context in which 'life long learning' has taken his place – be it as a real necessity to survive both as a national 'knowledge'-economy and as an individual –, and as a consequence the role of qualification systems is under pressure too. 'The transformation of the Netherlands into a knowledge-based economy has contributed to an emphasis upon maintaining the employability of the work force through the continuous updating of knowledge and skills. Successive policy papers and statements by interest groups increasingly emphasise the need to enhance the competitiveness of the Dutch economy, its transformation into a knowledge economy, and the need for a well-educated workforce which is responsible for and able to manage its own employability. It is in this policy context that lifelong learning has now become an important political priority and the case for lifelong learning possesses above all a labour-market rationale geared to the enhancement of employability' (cfr. Hake and Van der Kamp, 2001, pag. 5).

4.2 Policy initiatives

National action plans towards 'A life long learning'

In 1998 the national action plan 'A life long learning' was launched in the Netherlands, focussing at both promoting the employability of employed, unemployed and teachers as well as combating educational disadvantages and re-orientating education and training towards a life long learning. This national action program has been the policy-framework in the Netherlands for the further development towards a life long learning. In the slipstream of it various policy papers and agendas appeared, among others the 'employability-agenda' (a common agenda of government and social partners, directed towards employability of employed and unemployed) as well as the 'Impuls-agenda' (a common agenda of government and umbrella-organizations in the educational field, promoting a.o. strengthening of VET). Concrete actions were directed at a) stimulating training by employees (a.o. by tax reductions, recognition of non-formal and informal learning), b) striving for a starting qualification for lower educated employees and unemployed, c) incorporating training in reintegration measures for unemployed, d) strengthening social integration and social cohesion (a.o. by various forms of basic education for adults) and e) strengthening initial education and training (by combating early school leaving, by innovating the national qualification structure for VET and by stimulating the parity of esteem for VET).

By the Employability Agenda emphasis is placed upon a) enhancing social and cultural inclusion through active involvement in the workplace, and b) promoting employability through the introduction of greater flexibility in education and training trajectories and rapid re-integration in the labour market. These very specific characteristics of the Dutch labour market and lifelong learning policy are also reflected in the National Employment Action Plan (NAP) submitted annually by the Dutch government since 1998 within the framework of the European Union's programme to combat unemployment. (Hake en Van der Kamp, 2001). The EU's guidelines for national employment action plans in 1998 required a statement of priorities and measures with reference to 19 action points. With reference to action point 5 'the Member States and the social partners will endeavour to develop possibilities for lifelong learning', the Dutch NAP for 1998 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 1998a) focused on the national action programme for lifelong learning.

The centrality of measures in the employability agenda to promote lifelong learning and the national employment plans clearly indicates the close relationship in the Netherlands between the priorities in government economic and employment policies and the focus upon promoting the external and internal employability of the Dutch population. In the words of the 1999 NAP:

'Only a well-educated and lifelong learning labour force can make use of the opportunities offered by this employment policy, while investment in education, knowledge and skills strengthens the quality of employment, prevents the outflow of older people and can absorb the demand for more high qualified people on the labour market.'

Following Hake and Van derKamp (2001) we will mention some specific aspects of the employability agenda in order to achieve labourmarket objectives through initial and post-initial education and training.

Flexible learning trajectories and diversity of learning environments

Current government policy for initial and post-initial education and training, *together* with the new measures under consideration within the framework of the Employability Agenda, place significant emphasis upon the promotion of greater flexibility in available learning trajectories and greater diversity of learning environments to facilitate tailor-made combinations of learning and work for lifelong learners. This is inspired by individualisation processes in society, the increasing redistribution of learning throughout working life and that participants in education and training will comprise more diverse populations. Attention is devoted to *measures announced* in recent policy papers with regard to the development of: a) flexible dual trajectories combining learning and work; b) the accreditation of prior learning; c) individual learning accounts (and educational leave); d) the use of the multi-media and ICTs to facilitate open and virtual learning environments; and, e) regional infrastructures in the form of knowledge networks.

We elaborate a bit more on one of these (individual learning accounts) just as an illustration.

‘A further manifestation of individualisation in lifelong learning policy measures is the government’s expressed intention to undertake an experiment, in co-operation with the social partners, with *individual learning accounts* which will be directed in the first instance at employees without a basic qualification. As formulated in the March 2000 interdepartmental policy paper ‘In Good jobs’, these accounts would be built up on the basis of financial contributions by government, employers and employees themselves. They would not replace the fiscal facility for employers to provide education and training, but are regarded as an important complementary incentive for individual workers to engage in tailor-made learning efforts to improve their personal employability. The system for individual learning accounts will require that time for education and training is made available by employers, and that income-maintenance is guaranteed during the training period. This can be secured through use of the existing Career Breaks Funding Act, and the proposed system to enable employees to save tax deductions earmarked for the purposes of leave. The cost of education and training courses must not form a barrier for workers making use of individual training accounts, and to this end the government is considering a financial guarantee of access to suitable courses (cfr. also a evaluation study – by Geertsma a.o, 2004 – on experiments with individual learning accounts in par. 2.4.). Also under consideration is the introduction of *personal education and training budgets* for job-seekers, workers without a basic qualification, older workers, and in the longer term those on disability benefits. Instead of subsidising the providers of education and training, these budgets comprise financing the demand by individual consumers through a voucher-system enabling them to purchase education and training as they see fit. In the cabinet’s response to the report ‘All Paths Lead Eventually to a Start Qualification’ in June 2000, the government proposed to investigate the feasibility of a system of ‘training vouchers’ for premature school-leavers as a variant upon individual learning accounts. This report was particularly focused on the worryingly high levels of non-completion in secondary vocational education provided by the ROCs. It argued that vouchers might provide a better financial stimulus for young people to re-enter training by enabling them to purchase training from ROCs, employers or private training companies’ (Hake en Van der Kamp, 2001, p. 31).

Social exclusion: age, gender and ethnic dimensions of lifelong learning

Given the emphasis upon participation in the labour market and the employability of the working population in the development of lifelong learning policies in The Netherlands, the government’s approach job social exclusion focuses very heavily on promoting participation in the labour market for risk-categories. For this reason, it is important to direct attention to those categories among the population who have a weak position in terms of active participation in employment. According to the 1999 report *Test of Competitive Potential 2000*, these categories not only include the low qualified employed and job-seekers without a starting qualification, but also involve older workers, women and immigrants. An OECD report on social exclusion in 1999 also focused upon the need to reduce the barriers faced by

these three latter categories in gaining access to the labour market in The Netherlands (OECD, 1999c cfr. Hake en Van der Kamp, 2001). The NAP 2000 placed even greater emphasis upon specific measures directed at three specific categories at risk of social exclusion due to their exclusion from the labour market and their low levels of education and training. These were respectively older workers, women and the ethnic minorities.

Life-course perspectives on lifelong learning policies

Consideration of the often complex interactions between the generation, gender and cultural diversity dimensions of lifelong learning within a life-course perspective have been explored in reports from advisory committees. In its definitive report in December 1999, Promoting Labour Participation by the Elderly (Social-Economic Council, 1999c), the SER argued for the normalisation of labour market participation up to 60 years of age and for a significant increase above this age. To this end it advised the reversal of arrangements which have encouraged the norm of early exit from the labour market, the development of older-worker-friendly personnel policies in firms, and improved incentives for older workers. It viewed the need for increased levels of investment by firms in the education and training of older workers as a key priority. Indeed, it proposed that as much should be invested in older workers as in younger workers. This led the Social Economic Council (SER) to recommend that the social partners examine the possibilities of utilising the sectoral training funds more effectively in order to improve the employability of older workers, that special attention be given to education and training in small and medium-sized firms, and the development of a tax incentive for educational leave.

In March 2000, the Scientific Committee for Government Policy published a study *Changes in Life-courses: a study of the life-courses of Dutch adults born between 1900 and 1970* (Liefbroer & Dijkstra, 2000 cfr. Hake en Van der Kamp, 2001). The report points to the very significant changes in the life-courses of different generations and focuses on the changing relationships between participation in family life, relationships, work and education across the life-span. On the one hand, it points to the current high average levels of educational achievements by women which are not reflected in their participation in full-time work and the still) dominant pattern of combining part-time work and caring in the mid-life phase. In this regard, however, the report points to the development of significant differences in the labour market participation of high-qualified and low-qualified women. While high-qualified women increasingly combine work with caring for children, low-qualified women maintain 'traditional' patterns of early and often permanent exit from the labour market. Part-time employment by men is now concentrated in the post-fifty year period as preparation for retirement, while a significant number of the older generation, both men and women, are engaged in giving meaning to their social engagement in a long post-retirement period. In both cases there is an under-utilisation of education and training with negative consequences for employability. The report concludes that government policy inadequately responds to the fundamental changes in life-courses which in particular affect women and older people. With regard to older people, the report argues that age-related criteria -that is to say 'ageism'- in legislation and regulations lead to the social exclusion of older people from activities -including participation in work- in which their knowledge and experience could be of great value.

In a draft advisory report published in July 2000, A Life-course Perspective as Basis for Emancipation Policy (Social-Economic Council, 2000a), the SER argues the need for a lifecourse perspective as the basis of an emancipation policy. Such policy would recognise the growing diversity in life-courses, more complex combinations of working and caring for both men and women, and the promotion of employability in all phases of working life. The report expresses criticism with regard to the current emphasis in policy -the so called 'Combination Model'- that concentrates on the combination of work and caring during the child-caring period and is overly focused upon women as carers. The report proposes that greater participation by women in the labour market -the government target for 2010 is 65% compared to 51 % in 1999- implies that both women and men must be able to realise their references for combining work and caring. The report argues that this will necessarily involve greater variation in individual patterns of participation in the labour market across the life-span and will lead to more diversity. It suggests, furthermore, that caring is not the only reason why individuals prefer to reduce their involvement in work or take a career-

break, and it refers specifically to participation in education and training as part of lifelong learning. Consequently the SER proposes that emancipation policy must make it possible for individuals to enhance their employability through education and training in all phases of working life. It calls upon the government to introduce financial measures to ensure that individuals have access to the appropriate entitlements to facilitate variable work patterns and career breaks throughout working life as part of lifelong learning. A number of government and advisory committee reports have referred to the specific problems of women with regard to combining work, caring and education and training in different phases of the life-course.

However, recently the most structural measure has been the introduction (foreseen in 2006) by Dutch government of a measure related to a life-career perspective. This measure implies tax-reductions for employees who like to save a part (yearly 12% at max.) of their salary for all kinds of (educational) leave, up to at max. 2.1 years during their working career (Min. SWZ, 2002).

Dutch government has offered a new policy-agenda 'Life long learning' to parliament (Dutch government, 2002). As a consequence of both action plans and results of the last few years three main points of departures are emphasized: putting the individual person in the centre, transparency of 'the market for education and training', and setting of quality-standards'. Following this, challenges and proposals are formulated on the further implementation of life long learning in the area of both initial education and training, as well as towards training of employed and unemployed, and towards social cohesion. Responding to an advice on a life long learning by the Social Economic Council (SER, 2003), Dutch government recently stated that effective strategies into life long learning make it necessary to elaborate policies further in close cooperation between government, social partners and the educational umbrella-organizations. Therefore Dutch government is going to establish a platform Life Long Learning, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

4.3 National qualifications system and life long learning: major debates

Despite from a general LLL-perspective debates on all these initiatives are extremely important, in the following we namely focus at debates in the area of initial vocational education and training.

Especially regarding the relationship between the qualifications system and a life long learning, at least five issues are dominating national debates in the Netherlands.

First of all this pertains the *innovation of the national qualification structure* (including its institutional substratum) for secondary vocational education and training. Until now this national qualification structure contains four different levels: level 1: assistant, level 2: basic skilled worker, level 3: professional worker, and level 4: middle management or specialist. The national qualification structure is striving for broad occupational qualifications, which are durable, lasting and oriented tot the future. Students should be prepared both for individual flexibility (at internal as well as at external labour markets) and for a life long learning. There are serious doubts about reaching this goal. At least a broad consensus seems to exist both about the need for more transparency of the structure and about enhancing its capacity to meet the desires of schools and students. Therefore it is agreed to restructure the national qualification structure by making it competence-based, incorporating explicitly learning career-perspectives in it, and diminishing the number of qualifications. Above all it is increasingly recognized that therefore the institutional substratum of the qualification structure requires more flexibility. The constructors of the qualifications in the various sectors – i.c. the national bodies – should cooperate with each other to respond to cross-sectoral developments. And so it is the case with branche- or sector-bound organizations of social partners behind (cfr. Kraay-vanger a.o, 2002).

Secondly, strengthening learning and teaching processes is aimed at. Both social and economic developments and rapidly changing organisational structures make it necessary to strengthen the core tasks of ROC's: *innovation of learning and training*. Given the diverse nature of the provision of training and the

increasing emphasis on customisation in the vocational and adult education sector, government has tried to prevent threats to the mutual coherence of modernisation policy, by adding financial resources to the lump-sum subsidy of schools. These subsidies were previously available for separate modernisation projects. Institutions can now decide for themselves how to use the money to carry out modernisations. Regional training centres (ROC's) are increasingly working on integrated modernisation concepts, in which competency-oriented, demand-steered open-flexible, independent and/or natural learning is the aim.

Above all government is launching new programs to stimulate real innovations in learning-processes by strengthening cooperation and co-productions by schools and firms (cfr. Innovatie-arrangement). Development and implementation of modern labour-market oriented pedagogical-didactical concepts are a key issue and so the development of new forms of accreditation and assessment is.

More in general, from a policy-steering point of view this issue points also at the tension between standardisation (by external defined qualifications) at national level and pedagogical-didactical customisation of learning (directed both at students and local firms). Above all, this issue refers to the need for both sufficient HRD-policies within schools and strengthening of the external and internal management of schools.

Thirdly, the importance of a *starting qualification* for every one is stressed already during more than a decade. A starting qualification means a qualification at least at mbo-level 2. It is supposed that qualification at level 2 offers a sufficient qualifical equipment for both durable participation in the labour market and (further) learning.

However, more and more it is recognized that not everyone is able and/or willing to get such a starting qualification by learning routes within initial VET. It could be profitable for those groups at risk by streaming directly into the labour market and getting a durable as possible position in the labour market by gaining work experiences. Be it or not realizing in this way a formalized starting qualification, the emphasis is increasingly on 'learning on the job' for this group. In these 'learning by working' – trajects, it is important to look carefully to qualification components which are required for functioning in the labour market as well as fitting with the individual needs. Meanwhile debates are focussing on the tension between acquiring a starting qualification and streaming directly into the labour market.

In this context it is of relevance to notice that in some sectors of the labour market, experiments with 'individual learning accounts' are launched, especially directed at certain groups of employees.

Fourthly, parity of esteem of VET is stimulated, especially by *strengthening the position of VET vis a vis academic pathways* within the education system. Within the 'vocational column' of pre-vocational education (vmbo), secondary vocational educational and training (mbo), and higher vocational education (hbo) there should be better matches and cooperation, whereby it is assumed that opportunities for individual students to turn-over from the one to the other level will be enlarged and qualifical benefits will be reached. The educational or learning career of the student should be more in the centre, reducing institutional barriers set up by the position of schools both vis à vis each other and vis a vis (potential learning environments within) firms. From this point of view effective arrangements at regional level between various stakeholders are firmly promoted, e.g. stimulating strategies according to concepts like 'the learning region' (cfr. Hövels and Kutscha, 2002; Meijer, 2003). Generally, the main issue is not whether but how to diminish existing institutional barriers. Above all the national qualification structure should at least facilitate streaming from the one to the other type of educational institution within the 'vocational column'.

Lastly, *validation and recognition of nonformal and informal learning* become increasingly an important issue, related both to the national qualification structure for VET as to policies (by social partners, e.g. in bargaining about collective labour agreements on HRD and Personal Developments Plans – for POP's –) in the area of post-initial learning-trajects. Especially related to the national qualification structure debates are concentrating mainly at two main issues. First of all how to (re-)shape a national qualification structure, which is able to incorporate outcomes of nonformal and informal learning too (Klarus, 1998). Secondly it is questioned how far outcomes of nonformal and informal learning should be assessed (only) in terms of official national standards whether in terms of other (more customers-directed) kinds of standards too, whereby also the learning-promoting function of nonformal and informal learning is on the agenda.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

This country-report offers an overview of the main characteristics of the qualification system in the Netherlands as far as of relevance for life long learning, especially focussing on upper secondary vocational education and training (VET). Our main conclusion is that the VET-qualification system in the Netherlands in principle do have many ingredients for promoting life long learning, especially due to both its objectives and structural characteristics.

However, given the present state of affairs it is not so easy to show the actual role of the qualification system in promoting or impeding life long learning. Too many factors are complicating empirical evidence for this interrelationship due to a) the tremendous reconstruction of the VET-system since the new legislation of 1996 including its implementation process and renewals of the qualification structure, b) lacking systematical empirical data especially regarding the impact on occupational and learning careers, and c) the interfering and disturbing role of various mechanism both within and between the three main institutional layers of the system as well as between those layers at the one hand and delivering and receiving subsystems at the other. Therefore we have to limit our conclusions to more formal indicators and to first signals based on preliminary empirical evidence.

From a formal point of view it is first of all relevant to point out the merging of various types of courses – vocational directed or not, directed at young ones or at adults – into big institutional settings (ROC's), whereby essentially organizational preconditions for a transition between various learning routes are available. However, in practice transitions from ve towards vocational training routes hardly occur, while flexibilisation of the relationship between bol- and bbl-learning routes only recently is growing more popular. Actually both historically grown, traditional differences in culture (of teachers/trainers, school- and company-settings, learning methods, etc.) between ve and vocational training and between bol and bbl are playing a role as well as still existing – rather rigid – departementalization within ROC's.

Secondly, the thresholdless accessibility of VET-courses should be pointed out. Just everyone be it or not with a diploma of vmbo is allowed by law to start a VET-course, at least at level 1 and – if a course at level 1 is not available – at level 2 too. The rather differentiated spectrum of levels within VET is meant to facilitate transitions from one to another level in the system, in principle ending at levels 3 and 4. The latter offer access to higher/professional vocational education: almost fourthly percent with a diploma of level 3 + 4 is making the transition into hbo. However in practice a rather big gap seems to exist between levels 1 + 2 the one hand and levels 3 + 4 at the other, noticing that hardly one quarter of level 1 + 2-students is making transitions into level 3-courses. Nevertheless empirical evidence indicates that compared with the situation before the new legislation of 1996, the number of students who have entered the VET-system – i.c. at levels 1 or 2 has increased. So, due to renewals in the VET-system the entry-ports for VET seem to be more opened for students especially the lower qualified ones.

Above all, the system is characterized by partial qualifications, as an opportunity both to facilitate the choice for flexible learning routes and to offer certificates for entering the labour market without having completed a full qualification (with a diploma). Although dropout-rates from VET are rather high, precise data on the composition of these dropout-rates are lacking. The same counts for empirical evidence about both the actual labour market-value of these partial qualifications/certificates.

Certainly, the existence of opportunities to get partial qualifications/certificates, plays a stimulating role in both the development and the application of APL, within schools as well as within national bodies and branches.

Important incentives in the national VET-system to promote life long learning are embedded in actual strivings towards the further development of a competence-based qualification structure. From this point of view at least three kinds of incentives can be distinguished.

First of all the aim of realizing broad, qualifications should be noticed. Strivings are directed at broad qualifications, that should offer students a sufficient baggage both to maintain themselves on the labour

market in a flexible way and to develop themselves as learning labour market-participants and citizens. At the one hand by law the requirement of a so called threefold qualification is posed, including components which are (directly) labour market oriented as well as components which are directed at further learning and at the further development of citizenship. In other words, the qualification structure should also include competencies which are necessary for life long learning, e.g. learning attitudes and learning to learn, ICT-competencies, problemsolving, etc. From this point of view it may be assumed that both nonformal and informal learning – e.g. on the job, in the workplace – are stimulated too. At the other hand a competence-based qualification structure is going to be developed, aiming both at reducing the number of qualifications and making the qualification structure more transparent. Both durability and transparency of the qualification structure seem to be important preconditions for promoting life long learning.

Secondly, the ‘institutional substrate’ that is steering the qualification structure is increasingly under pressure, whereby national bodies – as the main constructors of the qualification structure – are increasingly forced to operate in a cooperative and cross-sectoral way, looking for a more appropriate balance between broadness of qualifications and recognizability for the labour market. Employability should not be defined purely within, but also across the borders of particular branches. Although some initiatives in this direction are really promising, vested interests in traditional ways of organizing branches – and according to this national bodies – are clearly hampering this striving until now. From this point of view the existing differences in organization structure of the substratum of the constructors of qualifications – i.c. national bodies (lob’s) – and of an important substratum for continuous VET at collective level – i.c. training funds – is bothering too.

Thirdly, it should be noticed that both the existence and shaping of a qualification structure – including its reference-value for examinations, and assessments – are often regarded as barriers for pedagogical-didactical innovations in learning processes. At the same time these are often seen as a legitimation by schools and teachers to stick on the old, traditional learning/teaching methods. A crucial challenge for the further development of the qualification structure from a life long learning point of view, seems to be to look for an appropriate balance between (the construction of) qualifications and to stimulate new, modern ways of learning and teaching. At this very moment it is strived to match developments towards a competence-based qualification structure with (preconditions for) competence-based VET-courses and learning. Lastly, a critical issue to be mentioned is the how far the national qualification structure will bother whether stimulate both attractive and flexible learning routes, be it or not combined with acknowledgment of prior learning (apl). From this point of view the LLL-perspective should be broadened too, from life long learning into life wide learning.

A recent policy document by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science formulates an agenda for the next future focussing towards a turn to learning-careers in a knowledge-society, including four main issues (Min. OCW, 2004):

- . both innovation and effectiveness by cooperation between VET-institutes and their environment
- . a variety of learning careers
- . attractive VET-contents which are fitting with the labourmarket
- . accessibility of VET-institutes.

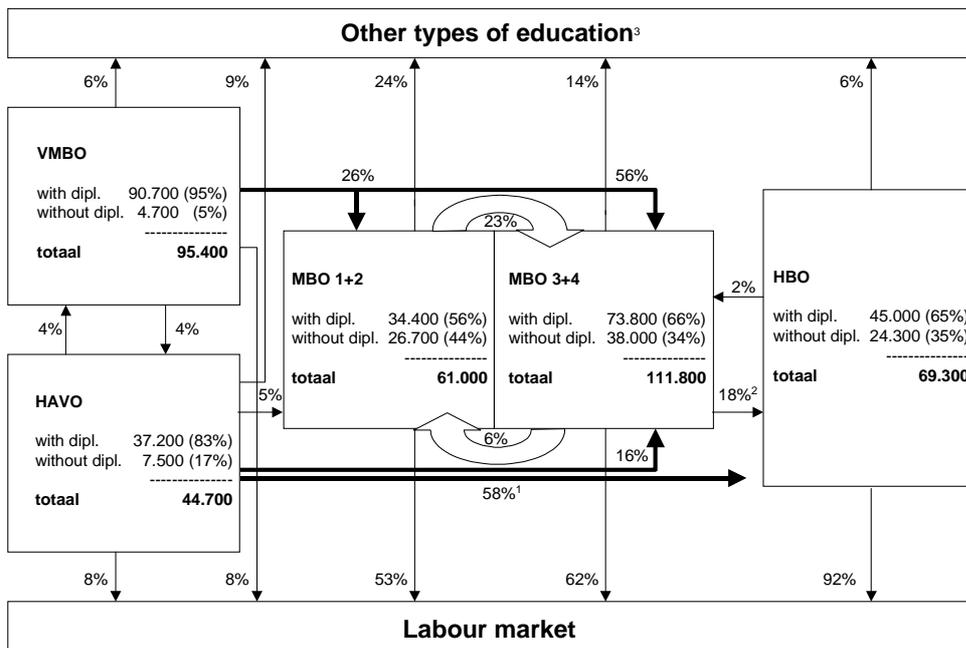
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Appendix 1 – Qualifying and streaming within the ‘vocational column’



Source: Min. OC&W (July 2001), Beroepsbrief, Zoetermeer.

1 Havo with diploma = 70%

2 Mbo (bol) 3+4 with diploma = 37%

3 It contains a rest category, including transitions to courses of the same level, as well as transitions to agriculture education.