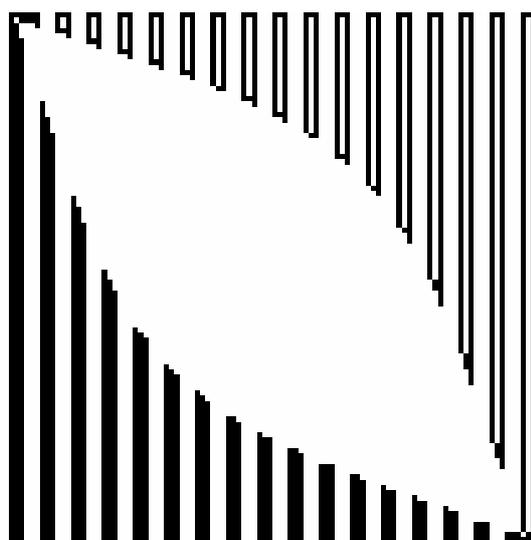


THEMATIC REVIEW ON ADULT LEARNING



THE NETHERLANDS

COUNTRY NOTE

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Objectives and organisation of the thematic review

The main purpose of the thematic review on adult learning is to understand adults' access and participation in education and training and to enhance policies to increase incentives for adults to undertake learning activities in OECD countries. It is a joint activity undertaken by the OECD Education Committee (EDC) and the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee (ELSAC) in response to the need to make lifelong learning a reality for all, to improve learning opportunities of low skilled adults and sustain and increase employability.

A total of 17 countries participated in the two rounds of the thematic review between 1999 and 2004. All related documents, Background Reports and Country Notes are publicly available on the OECD adult learning website (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/adultlearning>) and constitute a valuable source of information for international comparison. A comparative report providing an analysis of adult learning participation and policies as well as good practices and recommendations in the first nine reviewed countries was published in 2003 (OECD, *Beyond rhetoric: Adult learning policies and practices*, Paris).

Countries participating in the second round of the thematic review have chosen between two options: A full-scale review covering adult learning in a comprehensive view or a focused review addressing adult learning of low-skilled adults. From the nine countries participating in the second round, four have opted for the full-scale review (Austria, Hungary, Mexico, Poland), and five for the focused review (Germany, Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (England) and the United States).

The thematic review methodology includes national analysis and cross country comparison. Countries prepare a descriptive Background report on the status of adult learning in the country. This is followed by an OECD review team visit to the country that enables the reviewers to analyse adult learning on the basis of the Background report, discussions with representatives of government, employers, trade unions and practitioners, and on-site visits.

After each country visit, the team rapporteur, with the help of the review team, prepares a Country Note analysing the main issues concerning adult learning and policy responses in the country under review. The note addresses, *inter alia*, the major factors that can contribute to improve participation in learning: incentives set by public policy; how to make learning more attractive to adults; improving quality and effectiveness of learning; and how to promote greater policy integration and coherence. A final Comparative Report, published in 2005, addresses the different issues and policy responses in a comparative perspective, based on the insights gathered from the participating countries.

1.2. Country participation in the review

The Netherlands is one of the five countries that chose to focus the review on low-skilled adults. The review visit took place from 9 to 13 February 2004. The list of members of the steering committee, the author of the background report and the members of the OECD review team are presented in Annexes 1 and 2. The programme of the visit and the participants at the various meetings, are included in Annex 3. The review team would like to express their appreciation to the steering group, the authors of the

background report and to the wide range of officials and individuals involved in the visit. Their participation and commitment in the various aspects of the visit and in the provision of information on specifics, contributed to the overall accomplishment of its analysis of adult learning programmes and practices in the Netherlands.

2. PUBLIC POLICY REGARDING LOW-SKILLED ADULTS

Whereas the 1996 law on adult and vocational education (WEB=*Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs*) created the institutional framework for present-day adult education in the Netherlands, the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning (NAP LLL), launched in 1998 by Minister Ritzen, shaped the headlines of current Dutch policy.

In the law on adult and vocational education (WEB), the central government assumed the responsibility for the design of policies in this field, while their implementation through education plans was delegated to the local authorities. A multitude of providers merged into the some 40 Regional Education Centres (ROC's = *Regionale Onderwijs Centra*).

The NAP-LLL listed a series of precise objectives covering initial and continuous education, and general as well as targeted approaches. This country note will confine the list to those lines of action that are directly relevant for low-qualified adults. Importantly, the key elements of the action plan aim to achieve a balance between economic, social and cultural objectives:

- at the economic level, the objective is to keep the Dutch economy competitive in the context of the knowledge-based society;
- in the social field, initiatives are taken to promote the integration of all citizens into Dutch society – in particular, migrants and social assistance recipients;
- a third area relates to the personal development of citizens.

As regards low-qualified adults, the NAP includes preventative as well as remedial policies. As preventive approaches are focused on children and young people, they will not be dealt with extensively within this context; however, they are worth mentioning, at least to highlight the coherence between initial and adult education policy:

- first, considerable efforts have been spent on the development of early childhood education programmes for groups at risk;
- second, early dropout from the education system is tackled in various ways, including a systematic monitoring of individual dropouts and, wherever possible, guidance of young people back into education. According to recent statistics, in 2001, nearly half of all registered dropouts have been re-oriented successfully (Tilborg and Es, 2002).

The following main objectives relating specifically to low-qualified adults can be identified in the Background Report:

- *Providing a starting qualification to all workers.* The focus on workers is due to the fact that this objective is catered for by the social partners rather than the government. Although the central and local authorities are undeniably investing in programmes for the unemployed, Dutch experts have criticized the absence of a ‘matching’ commitment on the part of the government for economically inactive people (in particular, the elderly and those who have been disconnected from the labour market for some time).
- *Learning for citizenship.* One of the most interesting strands of adult education in the Netherlands is the provision of citizenship courses (including language, social skills, work orientation and educational support) to immigrants. Participation is compulsory for ‘newcomers’ (recent immigrants) and for ‘old comers’ who have lost their jobs; it is voluntary for other old comers.
- *Learning for re-integration* is another (compulsory) type of programme for the long-term unemployed. In this case, training is just one option among several pathways to re-integration.
- *Learning for social cohesion:* social assistance clients are urged to participate in activation programmes which, again, may or may not include adult education. These programmes may in turn be formal or informal, including, for example, voluntary work which may contribute to the development of skills susceptible of being accredited through APL (accreditation of prior learning) procedures.
- Along the same lines, the *National Action Plan for Literacy of Native Dutch Adults* has been launched in 2002 for a four-year period, as an attempt to prioritise the ‘forgotten group’ of native Dutch people who lack basic literacy skills for the knowledge-based society. This action plan appears to focus on sensitisation, as it does not involve (until now) any specific budgetary commitments.

Current adult education policies in the Netherlands should be seen against the background of a slump in the economy, with very weak GDP growth since 2001, turning negative in 2003 (- 0.7%). The ensuing constraints on government expenditure, combined with a drastic policy of tax reduction and austerity on the part of the Christian-democratic and liberal government, explain much of the rather selective government commitment in funding adult education programmes. At present, the social partners seem to be the main promoters of the knowledge society, while the government seems to confine its responsibility mainly to young people, immigrants¹ and welfare recipients (the latter group belongs to the shared responsibility of the government and the social partners).

In 2002, the Dutch social partners issued an advice entitled ‘The new way of learning’ (‘Het nieuwe leren’), in which they advocate a strongly market-oriented – and indeed *demand-driven* - policy of adult education. ‘Marketisation’ of the Dutch adult education system will be a key thread in this country note: the visit has strongly illustrated how the Netherlands is struggling with the transformation of a public service into a market, trying to take advantage of the ‘pros’ while avoiding the ‘cons’ of liberalisation (see Section 3 for further discussion).²

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1. The government is currently reforming the funding of ‘citizenship courses’, giving greater personal responsibility to the immigrants themselves.
 2. As one of the most recent initiatives in the adult learning field, the Dutch government has published in November 2004 a new Action plan for Lifelong Learning which is set to give a new boost to lifelong learning in the Netherlands. The English version of this plan may be found on www.minocw.nl/levenlangleren.

Before moving on, this section should note briefly some striking features of the Dutch institutional context, which need to be borne in mind in the debate about ‘marketisation’ of the Dutch adult education system.

First, the *demand side* is atypical in the sense that the ‘product’ is not only bought by individual consumers. As suggested above, the demand for education to a large extent emanates from the social partners and society as a whole. *Social partners* are actively committed to the development of labour market training, as work-related skills generate externalities in terms of productivity, flexibility and employability of workers, thus affecting the growth potential of the economy. *Society as a whole* expects to benefit from the social integration of immigrants, and therefore has urged governments to regulate and co-finance citizenship courses. Consequently, it would be erroneous to define the demand side of the adult education ‘market’ as an anonymous multitude of individuals: social partners and the government intervene in this market as very important players, even dominating the scene when priorities are set in relation to low-qualified adults.

The *supply side* of adult education in the Netherlands is undergoing dramatic reforms. After the concentration and merger operation in 1996, which resulted in the establishment of the regional education centres (ROCs),³ an opposite reform is currently underway with a deliberate aim to dismantle the quasi-monopoly of ROCs – at least, in some segments of adult education. Competition has become the main motto; it is expected to result in diversification, better quality, better matching with the needs of individuals, and greater cost efficiency. For example, in the future, local governments will no longer be obliged to buy citizenship courses for newcomers from the ROCs: they are allowed to outsource these courses to any public or private, commercial or non-profit provider. A similar liberalisation of the market is ongoing in the field of labour market training and re-integration of the unemployed. The ROCs, until recently the privileged partners of the government, have been criticized for *a)* being too rigid, sticking to an ‘8-to-5’ mentality, *b)* lack of responsiveness to the needs of individuals, *c)* offering ‘schoolish’ courses and thus deterring those adults who were traumatised by negative school experience in their youth, *d)* focusing too narrowly on labour market training, while neglecting provision for personal or cultural development, *e)* ignoring their remit of ‘motor of regional development’, and *f)* being expensive monopolies in public markets.

During the mission to the Netherlands, the review team visited two major ROCs, Mondriaan Onderwijsgroep in Den Haag and Noorderpoort in Groningen. Although these colleges may not be representative of the overall ‘population’ of ROCs, our impression sharply contrasts with the criticisms issued by various actors. Both colleges proved to be innovating in various segments (highly effective literacy courses, citizenship courses, flexible pathways to vocational qualification, integrated approaches to re-integration of marginalized groups, etc.). Both appeared to be strongly committed to the socio-economic development of their region. And, while some projects appeared to be discontinued by local governments for reasons of cost effectiveness, others benefited from strong economies of scale. One very appealing feature of the ROCs is their function of ‘one-stop-shop’ (or ‘warehouse’), where adults can find a wide supply of courses, ranging from basic literacy to advanced vocational training. In sum, we expect that ROCs will continue to play a key role in adult education in the future.

Other players on the supply side of the adult education market include commercial providers (mainly specialized in vocational, commercial and management training), folk high schools (specialized in personal development and socio-cultural courses), non-profit organisations (such as community centres) catering for the social and/or labour market integration of disadvantaged groups, etc. One new challenge for policy is to organize the market so as to ensure fair competition between unequal players.

3. The ROCs are responsible for initial vocational education as well as for adult education.

It is well-known that (adult) education is a very heterogeneous service, which involves a serious problem of transparency. Markets cannot operate smoothly if they are not transparent. Intermediaries play a key role in improving the information about courses on offer, both for individuals and for enterprises. This role is assumed by sectoral training funds (created by the social partners through collective agreements with the aim of ‘brokering’ between demand and supply) and a few RBOs (regional bureaus for training, departments of the dismantled former public employment service). Other intermediaries are simply commercial enterprises. Individual adults can address a career guidance centre or, in the case of unemployed persons, the Centres for Work and Income, which provide basic services to all individuals who apply for benefits (establishment of benefit entitlement, first screening, information about jobs and training opportunities). Note that more generic counselling services, accessible to all citizens and covering all (not only work-oriented) types of adult education, are still lacking.

3. BOOSTING INVESTMENT IN ADULT LEARNING

One of the key issues of the thematic review is under-investment in adult learning among low-qualified individuals. How can individuals, firms and local governments be encouraged to invest more? Despite uncertainty about the facts (an overall picture of inequalities in participation was lacking at the time of the country visit) it should be admitted that the Netherlands has been very creative in designing new methods to improve access to lifelong learning for low-qualified groups.

The Background Report provides a good overview of obstacles to investment identified in research; it emphasizes that obstacles should not only be sought on the side of the low-qualified adults themselves. Obstacles on the supply side - and institutional obstacles - include: lack of accessibility for disabled persons, lack of supporting services (such as child care for participants), high development costs of ICT-based training courses, legal barriers to access for individuals drawing social benefits, resistance of employers, and waiting lists (*e.g.* among ‘oldcomers’).

On the demand side, obstacles reported in the background report relate to lack of time (mentioned by 40% of non-participants), lack of basic skills to participate fruitfully in further training (30% of non-participants), direct costs (30%), rigidities (such as too ‘schoolish’ courses, unavailability of part-time courses), etc. The report does not mention lack of motivation or any other psychological barriers.

The remainder of this section will briefly discuss a range of measures that may provide solutions to (some of) these obstacles.

- compulsory programmes;
- information, guidance and sensitisation;
- financial incentives;
- supporting services;
- accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (APL).

- The last type of measure (APL) will not be elaborated here, as it is discussed extensively in Section 5. It goes without saying that flexible combinations of non-formal and formal learning raise the efficiency of learning routes and, thereby, also encourage individuals to move further up the educational ladder.

3.1 Compulsory participation

For some particular groups, participation in adult education programmes has been made compulsory: this applies to newly arriving immigrants ('newcomers'), the long-term unemployed and public assistance claimants.

Compulsory education and training ('learnfare') is undoubtedly a controversial strategy: several examples in the past (the Youth Training Scheme in Britain, mandatory training for the long-term unemployed in Denmark) have proved to be counter-productive in the sense that non-participants had higher (re-)employment probabilities than participants (Nicaise *et al.*, 1995; Nicaise, 2002). Several explanations have been put forward for the ineffectiveness of such programmes: the de-motivating effect of compulsion, stigma effects (compulsion suggests to employers that the target group are unwilling to participate), poor quality of the courses on offer (when the clientele of a course is ensured, providers have less incentives to innovate), lack of matching with the needs of the target group, etc. In the meantime, some governments have learnt from these experiences and adapted their measures, for example, by linking the obligation to participate to a wider choice between several options. Choice involves more incentives and better opportunities for matching with the needs of learners.

This appears to be the case also in some Dutch adult education programmes. A new law has lifted the obligation for municipalities to 'buy' their *citizenship courses* from the ROCs, which has created both incentives for the ROCs to innovate and room for alternative approaches promoted by competing providers, *i.e.* a more diversified supply. Whereas initially, citizenship courses were mainly confined to rather schoolish language courses, several combinations are currently on offer, depending on the needs and perspectives of potential clients:

- some courses are still confined to *Dutch language* teaching, which is sufficient for the newcomers who are relatively self-reliant or who want to proceed into further training afterwards;
- others *combine language teaching with work*, possibly also with on-the-job training, in so-called dual trajectories (CINOP, 2005). Work provides the minimum security needed by those with limited household resources, and thus helps to overcome financial barriers to training. At the same time, it is important that language learning goes in pair with practice in a 'natural' environment;
- a third, interesting variant of citizenship courses consists of '*educational support*' (or 'parenting courses') to (mainly) young mothers with children in kindergarten or primary school. During the mission, the review team met (mainly Turkish) mother groups in Tilburg. The commitment of mothers to school success of their children strongly boosts their own motivation to learn. At the same time, the learning of mothers has positive effects on their educational skills, which in turn improve the performance of children. In some cases, the citizenship course for parents is combined with early childhood intervention programmes for children (two-generation strategy).

A second group subject to compulsory (training) programmes consists of the *unemployed, disabled and welfare recipients*. Individuals belonging to these groups are obliged to accept training offers, although it is not guaranteed that they will receive such offers. Some examples from the country visit will

be discussed in Section 4. The law on work and income established the so-called ‘balanced approach’ (*sluitende aanpak*) urging municipalities to cater for re-integration services including, among other things, labour market training. According to the Background Report (CINOP, 2005) 400,000 individuals fall under a “work duty” and are therefore eligible for activation, but approximately 40% of this group appear to be ‘unemployable’ in the short run, for example, because of health problems. Here again, the diversity of services on offer is supposed to counterbalance the compulsory nature of the programmes.

In the Act on social assistance (*Algemene Bijstandswet*), introduced in 1996, *activation* was already made compulsory (at least, theoretically) for recipients of social assistance, based on a combination of tailor-made services, including education or training. Work-oriented activation relates to pathways combining training, guidance and work placements. Social activation typically combines elements of care, work orientation, training, voluntary work and/or community action. It aims at fostering the social inclusion of clients through ‘socially meaningful activities’ that may function as a stepping stone towards paid employment. Learning activities may include, for instance, ICT-initiation, pre-vocational courses, or personal development courses.

Note that free choice *by the individual* is never guaranteed in any compulsory system. In practice, several degrees of freedom can apply: *a*) the municipality chooses between alternative providers or packages and imposes this choice on the individual (which actually boils down to a single offer); *b*) the individual can make a choice from a limited set of accredited providers (with a risk that some courses are fully booked so that the freedom of choice is *de facto* further constrained); *c*) within the constraint of mandatory participation, the individual can negotiate with the municipality how s/he can actually meet the targets, with an open-ended range of options. The latter variant obviously offers the best guarantee for motivated participation and successful outcomes.

In all compulsory programmes, sanctions can be imposed on individuals who do not comply with the terms of the activities on offer. Sanctions mostly consist of reduction or withdrawal of benefits. It appeared very difficult to provide a picture of the frequency of sanctions, their impact on adult learning behaviour and the relative effectiveness of mandatory versus more optional courses.

From the above discussion, we suspect that potentially perverse effects can be avoided if compulsory activation is counterbalanced by high quality of courses and a maximum degree of *individual* choice between alternative providers.

3.2 Financial incentives

The Netherlands has widely experimented with different kinds of tax credits and subsidies for firms as well as individuals. Tax credits to firms turned out rather ineffective due to high deadweight and substitution losses (see Leuven and Oosterbeek, 2004) and, hence, the ‘*scholingsaftrek*’ was suppressed in 2004. Another tax allowance for firms, ‘*scholingsimpuls*’, is still operational: it aims to encourage the skills upgrading of workers up to the next level of qualification.

The most innovating experiments in 2001-2003 related to the *individual learning accounts* (ILA – also called personal development accounts - PDA) for workers or job seekers. The central government co-financed 2500 ILAs in eight pilot-projects for up to 50% (with a ceiling of 450 EUR) of the direct training (and guidance) costs. The other share was mainly funded by firms (for workers) or the municipality (for job seekers). The ILA was focused on low-qualified workers (54% of the account holders had no qualification or just completed prevocational education, as against 29% among the active population as a whole)⁴; 36% of the participants were unemployed. The review team visited a pilot project

4. Note that the non-response rate on this variable was 40%.

linked with a 'social workshop' (PERMAR at Ede), where integration pathways of about two years were offered to disadvantaged job seekers.

The ILA experiments were a direct response of the Dutch government to the Lisbon objectives. Given the short term of the experiments, there was no possibility to develop a genuine savings account; yet, the general feeling of the participating pilot organisations, firms and individuals was that the experiment had met its targets: individuals were sensitized to the importance of training as an investment in their human capital; employers contributed more than was anticipated; and the net impact appeared substantial, as 60% of the participants declared that they would not have invested in the absence of the government subsidy. Pilot organisations were satisfied with the reduction of paperwork and greater homogeneity of rules across municipalities (before the ILA, the practice of municipalities varied widely, with some municipalities requiring 3 competing offers for each re-integration pathway).

Another key message in this context is that the success of the measure may well be due to the 'educational broker' function of the pilots: without guidance and human support, the incentive effect would probably disappear. Personal guidance was linked, in the case of PERMAR for instance, to the use of personal development plans split up into various phases (assessment, work trials, orientation etc.). In other words, paradoxically, the purely financial incentive effect of this (financial) instrument is uncertain: it is the human investment that matters most. Some stakeholders were enthusiastic about the ILA but strong opponents of voucher systems (which supposedly would involve less guidance).

The continuation of the ILA scheme seems currently uncertain, due to disagreement between the government and the social partners in determining the nature of fiscal incentives for encouraging training. While the ILA pilots covered only the direct costs of adult learning, the recently negotiated 'life course scheme' (*levensloopregeling*) has taken a different approach, in that it includes leave for educational purposes, with income compensation.⁵

3.3 Information, sensitisation, guidance, support

Several stakeholders as well as experts have emphasized that incentives to invest, such as voucher schemes, completely miss their objective if potential learners are not adequately informed about learning opportunities. It is well-known that the 'market' for education is very heterogeneous, hence information and guidance play a key role in matching supply and demand. Learning weeks are just one example of sensitisation efforts, although insiders admit that such campaigns do not really affect individuals' learning behaviour.

The team witnessed interesting innovations in literacy programmes: in Tilburg, a special training was given to seven successful learners, who now work as volunteers to motivate and 'recruit' potential participants from their peer group. Through home visits, informal contacts, dissemination activities in the media, the first '*ambassadors*' have recruited more than 80 new learners in eight months' time. Undoubtedly, their campaign in the media must have had spill-over effects in the rest of the country, although this is hard to measure.

Some literacy programmes are themselves particularly interesting cases of outreaching to the hard-to-reach target groups: courses need to be *decentralized*, indeed preferably embedded in local community centres, as the most needy learners appear to have very limited mobility. Supporting services (such as child care) also need to be offered. In *Mondriaan Onderwijsgroep* (Den Haag), the staff devote a lot of energy to active coaching of participants and thus succeed in reducing drop-out to a minimum

5. Apart from educational leave, the life course scheme would also include leave schemes for home care, reconciliation of work and family life, etc.

(approx. 11%, mainly due to health reasons). In De Boog, a community centre at Utrecht, group sessions are supplemented with one-to-one teaching in some cases.

In the context of re-integration programmes for job seekers, (re-)training is increasingly being outsourced to (for-profit and not-for-profit) 'reintegration companies'. These companies engage *personal counsellors* whose remit is to assist job seekers in defining their learning and integration pathways, and to coach them until they have been successfully re-integrated. While learning is the main focus of the integration pathways, the services offered may also cover other types of activities such as psychological guidance, referral to health care etc. Similar methods of '*case management*' are being widely used in the context of social assistance. In Tilburg, the municipality has introduced a system of individual activation contracts between welfare clients and case managers, with the municipality as a third (paying) party. Case managers assist their clients in defining their pathway and remain responsible for the implementation of commitments on both sides. This intensive approach (with a caseload of 70 clients per social worker as opposed to 180 in earlier years) seems to perform relatively well, as Tilburg saw its number of welfare clients stagnate at a time when it grew substantially in other parts of the country.

The OECD review team also saw examples of *mentors* engaged in enterprise training programmes, particularly in the context of the BBL, a work-based education scheme providing certificates of qualification. In some cases (*e.g.* De Ruyter, a chocolate factory at Baarn) these mentors are the most experienced production workers of the firm, who have successfully completed an extensive 'personal development plan' through training and work experience; in other cases (*e.g.* Philips Lighting Winschoten) they are teachers from vocational schools, hired to supervise trainees during the BBL training route (see Section 5.2).

Not only individuals, but also firms and local authorities can 'buy' information and counselling from professional offices. Most of these services are provided by *sectoral training funds*, funded through specific levies on the wage bill. Two '*Regional Training Bureaus*' (RBOs) have survived reforms,⁶ by re-orienting their activities to 'brokering' in this field. The RBO of Groningen, for example, helps firms to develop company training plans in line with their strategic objectives, to identify appropriate training providers, and even to get co-financing for its services (*e.g.* from the European Social Fund).

4. QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMMES

As mentioned in Section 1, the Netherlands has radically reformed the institutional framework for re-integration and adult education services, creating a system of quasi-markets, with a view to increasing efficiency. This option was endorsed by an advice issued by the Social and Economic Council (SER) in 2002,⁷ which advocates a demand-led, competitive market in adult education. Labour market re-integration as well as some adult education services have been privatized, and outsourcing now occurs on the basis of competitive tendering. Local governments act as demanders of services, on behalf of client groups; public, non-profit and commercial suppliers are allowed to compete for contracts. This model

6. The RBOs were initially designed as an interface between education and the labour market, a role that has been transferred to the ROCs.

7. SER (2002), *Het nieuwe leren: advise over een leven lang leren in de kenniseconomie*

became fully operational in the field of re-integration services in 2001, and in adult education since 2004.⁸ The aim is to improve cost-effectiveness, to extend the scope for choice on the part of the government, and to raise the responsiveness of services to the needs of target groups.

During the country visit, the issue of marketisation was raised by nearly all players. Local authorities tend to welcome the reforms, as their margin of manoeuvre is greatly extended. For example, whereas previously citizenship courses needed to be bought from the local ROC, municipalities can now conclude contracts with other providers. In the first place, the mere existence of alternative options strengthens the position of municipalities in negotiations with the ROCs. Alternative providers are sometimes preferred, either for their greater responsiveness to the needs of the community, or for their greater cost effectiveness. As a reaction to this, ROCs are diversifying their own courses and offer better value for money. The range of reintegration and social activation projects offered by the ROC of Groningen (Hybrid, Route, Voorwerk...) illustrates the possible flexibility of the response – despite the fact that some more expensive projects were discontinued. Thus, ROCs are well-equipped for competition, as they can combine ‘recurrent’ education subsidies with the project funding linked to the yearly tenders for reintegration projects. On the other hand, they may be losing ground for other than economic reasons, as their emancipatory culture clashes with the more compelling approach of other providers and local governments.

While it is obvious that the reforms have improved the *scope for choice* on the part of public authorities (through the tendering system), it is unclear whether the free choice of individuals is actually being fostered. Increasingly, the government chooses and imposes its choice upon them. Only in cases where the same group of individuals is assigned to several tenderers, will there be any room for genuine *individual* choice. Examples include the diversity of citizenship courses on offer in some Dutch cities, as depicted in Section 3.1 above. In such a context, immigrants can choose themselves between different types of courses (combined with parenting courses, vocational training, social guidance or just intensive language courses) depending on their own needs and preferences. Even though participation as such is compulsory, it can be assumed that a wider range of options on offer contributes to greater motivation among learners. The opposite example is provided by unemployed persons, who are assigned to re-integration companies through the tendering system and are less likely to receive the training they want, as the companies decide on their behalf what courses they need to attend. In sum, when old monopolies are broken down through the introduction of tendering mechanisms, one should be cautious not to replace the monopolies with de facto monopsonies.

Marketisation has also shifted the emphasis from input to (more) *output-based funding*. Output may mean e.g. the number of individuals successfully completing a course or, in the case of reintegration, the exit rates into jobs. In this way, incentives are built into the system to prevent dropout and to improve the usefulness of courses for everyday life or their relevance for the labour market.

Although quasi-markets theoretically result in lower *prices*, Struyven and Steurs (2004) see no signs of a general cost reduction in the field of reintegration services.

Needless to say, the liberalisation of the adult education market entails some risks that need to be addressed. One drawback often quoted in the literature is *segmentation* of the market, with the most powerful providers *creaming off* the most interesting clients. The review team saw clear signs of such effects in citizenship courses. ROCs can build on their past experience, which yields comparative advantages, both in terms of scale and suitable course material (e.g. computer-assisted tutorials). They tend

8. In fact, training for re-integration was already market-driven as re-integration companies contracted out training to other players. As from 2004, municipalities can also directly outsource other types of adult education (such as citizenship courses) to private providers.

to target the average, relatively well-educated and flexible newcomers who mainly need standard language courses. Commercial providers are catering for other organised groups of candidates, who still do not need any specific support. Community centres, situated closest to the deprived neighbourhoods, are then left with those who have failed at other courses, who need intensive coaching and combine multiple problems for integration. They work with small groups and offer tailor-made courses, integrating personal and social skills with language teaching and providing child care or any other type of support. Paradoxically, the community centres are themselves poorly funded: they need to rely for a large part on volunteers.⁹

A related example concerns work-oriented training for job seekers. Although prior streaming of job seekers by the public authorities into phase 1 (the ‘strongest’ group) up to phase 4 (those with multiple disadvantages) is meant to prevent creaming, providers tend to operate a second screening after intake and ‘park’ those with greater disadvantage without any adequate offer.

Output funding allegedly reinforces the tendency to *sacrifice quality to quantity*. As bonuses are paid to reintegration firms when individuals find jobs earlier, firms will stick to the ‘work first’ principle and recur less often to training. Observers confirmed to us that the demand for training is declining in the Netherlands since the Law on Work and Income has become operational. Quick placement may in such cases mean that beneficiaries fill precarious jobs and drop out soon. In other words, marketisation may involve that short-term placement is prioritised over long-term integration. Theoretically, local governments can prevent these perverse effects by spreading payments over several instalments, depending on the sustainability of placements. However, this involves a more sophisticated monitoring system.

The third risk relates exclusively to reintegration services which are, almost by definition, very sensitive to the business cycle. Unemployment insurance is typically operated by the state, because of the ‘*collective risk*’ argument: this means that a given risk (e.g. unemployment) is not distributed independently across individuals. As the risk materialises, many individuals are affected simultaneously, so that private insurers are unable to cover the losses with the premiums paid by customers. Similarly, the risk of (non-)reintegration is correlated between individuals and, in periods of high risk, private reintegration firms may be unable to meet their commitments as the economy enters a slump. This may trigger bankruptcies unless contracts can be re-negotiated or funding is more input- than output-based. Observers signalled the phenomenon of bankruptcies to the review team during the visit; however, it was impossible to check this statement with statistics.

Summing up, we can not yet conclude whether the Dutch reform towards a market-driven system of adult education has been – or will be – successful. It may produce better quality, more choice, and a better matching between the needs of individuals and the labour market. However, it seems as if the risks of creaming and volatility of effects have as yet not been fully assessed. Much will depend on the wisdom of local governments and UWV-centres, who are responsible for negotiating the outsourcing contracts.¹⁰ There is indeed some reason for concern that many local negotiators do not have the training required for such operations. During discussions about the expected effects, the stumbling stones and possible ways to tune contracts so as to avoid pitfalls, some of the interviewees simply replied that they would probably make mistakes in the transition period, and that they would have to learn from trial and error.

Effective monitoring of education markets actually requires very sophisticated evaluation instruments and funding arrangements. For example, funding criteria can take on board equity as well as

9. Admittedly, the community centres are currently not subject to the same strict quality control.

10. The UWV-centres or social insurance centres (Uitvoering Werknemersverzekering) are responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits and the outsourcing of re-integration services. However, on the individual level, the CWI (Centres for work and income) give advice on the eligibility of individuals for benefits and services.

efficiency criteria, by referring to ‘value added’ rather than mere output. Whereas courses offered to low-qualified groups can never yield the same ‘output’ (e.g. placement into jobs, or performance on achievement tests) as those for highly qualified groups, they may well yield the same (or indeed higher) value added. In this case, value added should be measured by the *difference* in employment probability or average ‘learning *progress*’ between participants and non-participants with identical profiles. Such advanced funding criteria are demanding in terms of evaluation and are seldom used in practice.

Similarly, financing arrangements can be made to foster sustainable effects: in the case of training for the unemployed, payment schedules with multiple instalments after job placement may be made dependent on job retention criteria (which boils down to a sort of no-claims bonus system); or training providers may be forced to guarantee additional services to those who drop out after placement. Such advanced funding mechanisms involve serious investments in information, evaluation and negotiation techniques. Uncertainty¹¹ about expected outcomes may be such that some markets fail altogether (as with training for the unemployed in periods of economic downturn). Textbooks of welfare economics indeed quote uncertainty and collective risks as typical causes of private market failure (see e.g. Barr, 2001).

Furthermore, the perspective of a market in which competing suppliers adapt their provision to the preferences and needs of ‘the demand side’ pre-supposes that individuals are aware of their needs and perfectly informed about the diversity, quantity, quality and price of the courses on offer. Apart from traditional arguments such as externalities, merit goods etc., far-reaching government intervention will remain indispensable, just for reasons of uncertainty and lack of information, within any foreseeable time horizon. To begin with, producing and providing information to suppliers and customers remains a major challenge for the government in the coming years. Even the Dutch Social and Economic Council seems to be struggling with the question whether more government intervention or, on the contrary, further marketisation will enhance transparency of the adult education market (CINOP, 2005). The answer from economic theory is, unambiguously, that the lack of information in markets such as education is a key argument for government intervention – in other words, the government is responsible for making the market transparent.

At present, successive reforms, budget cutbacks, decentralisation, amalgamation of budgets for education with other social budgets, budget shifts between ministries etc. seem to create more uncertainty instead of smoothing the transition to a competitive market. The ROCs in particular fear that abrupt reforms may threaten thousands of jobs among experienced teachers.¹²

Obviously, we do not want to pretend that the (partial) privatisation and liberalisation of education service provision are wrong options. However, it needs to be pointed out that the smooth functioning of an adult education market involves tremendous challenges in terms of monitoring and information management. Marketisation will not automatically solve this problem, quite on the contrary.

11. Uncertainty is defined here as ‘unknown risk’. Whereas private insurance mechanisms can perfectly handle risks with a known distribution and independence between individuals, uncertainty and collective risks (rightly) deter private investors.

12. In particular, the new reform of the market for citizenship courses, announced in April 2004, has given rise to great unrest and indeed protest within the Council for vocational and adult education (*BVE-raad*), the umbrella organisation of the ROCs. The reform contains several elements that directly undermine the market position of the ROCs: suppression of preferential relationships between municipalities and ROCs, completely free choice of citizenship courses by newcomers, banning of the (successful) ‘dual trajectories’, amalgamation of education subsidies to large cities with other subsidies, and suppression of quality control on the content of courses.

5. POLICY INTEGRATION

This last section addresses the question of coherence between adult education policies and other policy areas, as well as the question as to how, on the micro-level, learning opportunities can be combined into individualised, flexible learning routes.

5.1 Co-ordination with other policies

Several examples provide convincing evidence of a substantial degree of coherence between adult education and other economic and social policies in the Netherlands.

- *citizenship courses* are obviously used as an instrument to integrate newly arrived immigrants more smoothly into Dutch society. Moreover, as mentioned in Section 3.1, these citizenship courses are being combined with education support, on-the-job training or other elements depending on the target group;
- *reintegration pathways* illustrate the integration of adult learning with employment and social protection policies, in the context of the Law on Work and Income. Integration of the three types of policies aims to make active labour market policies more efficient, while reducing the cost of social protection, through a smart combination of incentives to service providers. Note also that the social partners are involved in the design of adult education policy in the context of the Social and Economic Council SER as well as the Steering group for the promotion of vocational education and training (*Stuurgroep Impuls Beroepsonderwijs en Scholing*);
- various education programmes have been decentralised to municipal authorities, including literacy courses, citizenship courses, and interventions in basic education (*e.g.* community schools). According to the city councillor responsible for education at Tilburg, this supplements the set of instruments in the hands of municipal authorities to tackle poverty. Whereas previously, municipal interventions were often confined to social assistance, a more preventive, long-term approach can now be adopted through educational programmes. Moreover, instruments can increasingly be combined into holistic approaches (including housing, social activation, education, employment, etc.);¹³
- last but not least, education can be integrated with cultural action in the context of folk high schools or cultural centres.

5.2 Flexible learning routes on the individual level

The integration of modules from different providers into individualised learning routes has received much attention in the Netherlands.

To begin with, there is a strong awareness that flexible learning routes can dramatically reduce the costs of lifelong learning: 26% of the working population¹⁴ currently have no “starting qualification”,

13. On the other hand, devolvement of education services to the municipal level may entail a risk of unequal treatment of applicants. Municipalities may exclude applicants from neighbouring municipalities, while the same service may be of very different quality depending on local priorities and resources.

14. According to OECD data based on ISCED levels, 34% of the total population aged between 25 and 65 have not gone beyond ISCED level 2 (OECD-CERI, *Education at a Glance*, 2004 edition, Table A1.1).

as understood in the Netherlands. This means that the key objective of providing a starting qualification to all workers requires a massive investment. According to the representatives of the social partners, extensive recurrence to AP(E)L - *accreditation of prior (experiential) learning* – is an indispensable element of any strategy to achieve this objective.¹⁵

One excellent application of APL is found in the company-based education scheme ‘BBL’, a part-time vocational education programme covering the same four levels as its equivalent in initial education (‘BOL’).¹⁶ Nationwide, more than 140,000 individuals participate in BBL-courses yearly. In De Ruyter, the chocolate factory in Baarn, as well as in Philips Lighting (Winschoten), we saw examples where workers’ work experience was validated and enriched by on-the-job, individualised learning routes, under supervision of school teachers. The resulting certificates are provided by the ROCs and officially recognised by the National Service for Accreditation of Prior Learning, and are thus transferable to other contexts. According to the HR manager of Philips, the firm’s motivation for investing in the programme was double: *a*) making workers more employable through a job rotation scheme within the firm and theoretical upskilling; and *b*) providing workers with a valid certificate of vocational education so that, in the event of a plant closure, skills can be transferred to new jobs.

APL is also used intensively for new immigrants, either through recognition of foreign diplomas, or in the context of the so-called dual trajectories where work and learning are combined. A national service centre for APL disseminates information and promotes APL methods. Yet, all observers agree that it is very difficult to assess experiential competences outside the workplace. Further development of APL is considered a key priority for the future.

Also on the firm level, the use of ‘*personal development plans*’ is currently being promoted as an instrument to design and monitor individual routes in a systematic way. These personal development plans are updated annually.

For jobless adults, the key instrument consists of various models of *integration pathways* or (*social*) *activation pathways*. At PERMAR (an integration company for disabled or otherwise marginalised persons) the integration pathway may last for two years. It usually starts with a preparatory phase (screening, assessment, referral to health care...) of three months; this is followed by an orientation phase with short work trial periods, lasting for up to six months. The proper training takes 12 to 24 months. The last phase of the pathway consists of ‘after-care’ or job coaching, once the individual has found a job (again, for six months). The coaches confirm, however, that the trend towards marketisation entails new time (and cost) pressures, which go at the expense of training.

A good example of *social activation* pathways is the ‘Voorwerk’ (‘pre-job’) project run by ROC Noorderpoort (Groningen) in a partnership with five social and labour market organisations. The target group consists of 350 so-called ‘phase 4’ clients (with the greatest distance from the labour market), a heterogeneous group comprising migrants, long-term unemployed, people with health problems, school dropouts, disabled people and older workers. Apart from training and job placement, the activities offered include personal development, psychological assistance, social and recreational activities, etc. This

15. However, provision of a starting qualification might not be appropriate in all cases. For example, it might not be very (cost-) effective to give workers close to retirement age the full training necessary for a starting qualification. Instead, it might be more useful in that case to provide some functionally-related training them enables them to keep their job.

16. BOL (*Beroepsopleidende Leerweg*) is a full time, school-based education curriculum including work trial periods; BBL (*Beroepsbegeleidende Leerweg*) normally involves part-time work (1 day/week) with a regular work contract in combination with a part-time education curriculum (4 days/week). Both curricula are organized by the ROCs, include four levels and yield equivalent certificates.

combination of community action, adult education and care is thought to boost sustainable integration on a purely voluntary basis. Admittedly, the absence of pressure on participants is perceived by some stakeholders as a factor reducing effectiveness, which has involved some tension concerning the future orientation of the project.

Financial instruments for individualised learning routes consist of *individual learning accounts* or, perhaps more importantly in the future, the *life course regulation*. As the continuation of ILAs is uncertain, attention can be focussed on life course regulation, which should encourage individuals to invest (more) in themselves. While ILAs are meant to cover direct educational costs, the life course regulation is used to cover income losses.

CONCLUSION

Policy documents in the Netherlands demonstrate the existence of a *clear set of objectives* relating to the promotion of adult learning among the low-qualified. Moreover, there is a balance between economic and social objectives. On the economic level, the Netherlands is fully endorsing the ‘Lisbon strategy’ which sees the knowledge economy as the engine of competitiveness and growth. On the social level, priority is given to recent immigrants (‘newcomers’) and social assistance recipients. This balance between economic and social objectives broadly matches the two main arguments for public intervention in the economic literature: the ‘Robin Hood’ function (redistribution) and the ‘piggy bank’ function (investment in economic security). Each of these two roles is discussed below.

Redistribution has been focussed almost completely, until now, on the ‘starting qualification’ objective, the citizenship courses and re-integration services (including training) for job seekers and social assistance recipients. The citizenship courses in particular can be seen as an example of good practice, which informs policy reforms in other countries. Nevertheless, two more general questions arise in this context: *a)* whether the priorities have been accurately ponderated, and *b)* whether they are being effectively implemented.

As regards the delineation of target groups, Dutch experts and field workers have pointed at the shortage of provision for groups that deserve similar attention, such as native Dutch illiterate adults or economically inactive adults (including the elderly). In the case of literacy courses for Dutch adults, a problem of displacement by newcomers is being signalled; and the ongoing ‘National Action Plan’ can not be expected to produce strong effects unless it is adequately funded.

As regards the efforts to ensure a starting qualification for all, the actual imbalance in favour of the working population may be attributed to the fact that social partners are inclined to prioritise this group, while the Dutch government is currently very reluctant to spend additional resources to fill the gaps. Despite some very interesting measures and programmes, such as the BBL – tailor-made qualifying education on-the-job – and the individual learning accounts, there is as yet no ‘right to a starting qualification for all’.

At the same time, the review team has had the impression of a gap in know-how and strategic thinking between the central and local governments: the latter often have not yet elaborated their policy agenda, nor even acquired the know-how to govern local education markets.

Turning now to the second role for public policy -- fostering economic security and, hence, efficiency in adult education markets (the 'piggy bank' function) -- governments traditionally used to dominate these markets through direct public provision in various segments (further education, labour market training, culture etc.). After having carried through a far-reaching liberalisation of its employment and re-integration services, the Netherlands is currently implementing a similar reform of its market for adult education. Not only is there a shift from direct public provision towards outsourcing but, at the same time, the degree of public funding is shrinking and other stakeholders are being urged to invest more. The ROCs have lost their quasi-monopoly, but they are well-equipped for competition, as they can combine 'recurrent' education subsidies with the project funding linked to the yearly tenders for reintegration projects.

The general expectation is that marketisation will boost efficiency (better matching between supply and demand, lower costs, higher quality), while private co-financing should contribute to the necessary overall growth in adult learning investments. As shown in Section 3, marketisation has produced some, though not all, of the expected efficiency gains: it has triggered a diversification of provision and thus created opportunities for a better matching of supply and demand. On the other hand, no impact on costs has been visible so far. Furthermore, marketisation has generated (or exacerbated) some predictable problems of private education markets. To begin with, the risk of segmentation and creaming has increased. This perverse effect tends to be reinforced when too much emphasis is put on output funding.

The main challenge for the government is to design formulae of competitive tendering that strike a balance between equity, quality and efficiency, and that guarantee universal access to adult education services. There is a shared feeling among both the visiting and Dutch experts that neither local governments, nor other major stakeholders are fully prepared for the management of such an atypical market, which relates to services that have an enormous impact on the life course of vulnerable people. Specific training and coaching services should be offered to the key stakeholders during the reform process.

In the case of training for labour market reintegration, a new risk of market failure has arisen due to the 'collective risk' nature of unemployment. Whenever the funding of re-integration companies is (partly) based on output criteria (such as job placement rates after training), the providers in fact combine a training and a kind of insurance service. Now, private insurance markets typically fail in cases where the risks are correlated between individuals (through the business cycle). Bankruptcies of re-integration companies are a predictable consequence, and this may well discourage private providers from investing in this market segment in the future, unless the government is willing to fully take over this risk. This means that output funding may be an inaccurate instrument in this context. Given that output funding is often the most powerful incentive for efficiency gains, it seems that the collective risk argument calls into question the effectiveness of the Dutch policy in this particular market segment.

As regards the objective of mobilising low-qualified individuals and enterprises to invest more in adult learning, the Netherlands has innovated successfully with financial instruments (mainly, the individual learning accounts). Given the importance of financial obstacles to training identified by survey research (including time constraints, which in fact refer to opportunity costs), financial incentives are probably a necessary element of equal opportunity policies. At the same time, the main lesson from the ILA experiments seems to be that their success depends crucially on the provision of appropriate guidance and support. In a complex and non-transparent market, *human support* remains indispensable – for individuals as well as firms.

The fate of the ILAs is uncertain, as no consensus could be reached between the government and the social partners about continuation or mainstreaming of the experiments. However, the Netherlands has started a new experiment in 2005 to get a better grasp of the effectiveness of ILAs for low-educated

employees. At the same time, negotiations about the 'life course scheme' have yielded a compromise where an individual 'time credit' can be used for a leave of absence for several different purposes (education, care, early retirement etc.), and the leave is supported by tax breaks.. What the Dutch experience shows is that the combination of (redistributive) financial instruments with personalised information and guidance services can have a substantial impact on the development of the demand for education on the part of (low-skilled) adults themselves, quite differently from the demand induced by compulsory schemes or by employers.

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ANNEX 1

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ANNEX 3

PROGRAMME OF THE VISIT

Monday 9 February – The Hague

- 09.00 *Meeting with the National Steering Committee and the authors of the Background Report*
Mrs Lian Bastiaansen (Ministry of Social Affairs)
Mrs Sigrid Johanisse (Ministry of Economic Affairs)
Mr Toon Janssen (Ministry of Education)
Mr Arjen Ploegmakers (Federation of Trade Unions; FNV)
Mr Cees Hoogendijk (Federation of Employers organisations for SME's; MKB Nederland)
Mr Hans Koole (Federation of Employers organisations; VNO-NCW)
Mr Rijk Roelofs Christian Federation of Trade Unions; CNV)
- 10.30 *Discussion with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs*
Mr Toon Janssen, Ministry of Education
Mrs Lian Bastiaansen, Ministry of Social Affairs
- 11.30 *Discussion with the Ministry of Health & Welfare*
Mr Henk Hoek
- 13.30 *Visit to Adult Education Department of Regional Education Centre (ROC) Mondriaan Onderwijsgroep:*
Department for Illiteracy
Mrs Irene Gunneweg
Department for the Education of Immigrants
Mrs Elly Quist
Central Bureau
Mrs Jos Leenhouts
- 18.00 *Dinner hosted by the ROC Mondriaan Onderwijsgroep*

Tuesday 10 February – Utrecht, Ede and Baarn

- 09.00 *Visit to the local Community Centre De Boog, Utrecht*
Mrs Tineke de Groot

- 11.30 *Visit to the Training Fund in the Food processing Industry, SOL (Stichting Opleidingsfonds Levensmiddelenindustrie), Ede:*
Mrs Nienke Tabe
- 13.00 *Visit to PERMAR (Organisation for labour market reintegration), Ede*
Mrs Edith Zutmuller
- 15.30 *Visit to the de Ruyter company (food processing firm), Baarn*
Mrs Gerard Esser

Wednesday 11 February – Tilburg

- 09.30 *Visit to a primary school de Regenboog, hosting pedagogical support lessons for parents organised by the local ROC Midden Brabant:*
Mrs Pavli Pavel
Mr Paul Herman
Mrs Larissa Katchtrian
- 11.00 *Meeting with the City councillor and local Council staff:*
Dr Hugo Backx
Mr Wil de Kort
- 13.00 *Meeting with Tilburg City council “Ambassadors” (i.e. people employed by the Tilburg city council to reach out to the target group for adult education)*
Mrs Miep van de Pol
Mr Peter van Cleef
- 14.30 *Visit to the Public Employment Service (CWI)*
Mrs Inge Huisman
- 20.00 *Dinner with researchers and experts on adult learning*
Prof Dr Max van der Kamp,
Dr Barry Hake and
Mrs Angelika Kauff)

Thursday 12th February – Groningen and Winschoten

- 09.00 *Visit to ROC Noorderpoort College: The Route project (social activation and guidance of the long-term unemployed and immigrants), Groningen*
Dr Herman Veenker
- 11.00 *Visit to RBO (Training Brokerage), Groningen*
Mr Bram Keuning
Mrs Carolijn Doesburg
- 12.45 *Visit to the Sheltered Workplace “Synergon”, Winschoten*
Mr Jan Berkhof
- 15.00 *Visit to the Philips plant (electronics), Winschoten*
Mrs Anke Brouwer
Mrs Ellen Kadijk

Friday 13th February – The Hague

- 10.00 *Meeting with experts/researchers:*
Chair: Dr C. Doets
Prof. Dr B. Hövels
Dr B. Hake
Dr S Verhallen
Dr J. Onstenk
Dr C. Tenhaeff
Dr M. Tijssen
- 13.00 *Wrap-up meeting with National Steering committee: Presentation of preliminary findings by OECD Review team*

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