Case study Netherlands

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Facilitating vocational learning: the influence of assessments

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Table of contents

List of tables and boxes

Tables

Boxes

CHAPTER 1.
Introduction

In the Netherlands, the quality of examinations (in terms of whether examinations cover the full content of stated learning outcomes, i.e. alignment between learning outcomes and assessment) has been a key topic since the introduction of the Act on VET and adult education (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs, WEB) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995).

The basic idea historically underlying the Dutch VET system and that is also included in the WEB is that centrally the *what* of VET is defined; but that the *how* is the responsibility and autonomy of VET schools. VET schools are responsible for the quality of examinations and have different ways (routes) to organise the exams complying with the nationally agreed learning outcomes described in the qualification files. The case study explores how validity of assessment is ensured across VET schools. An interesting field of study in this regard is to what extent schools can adjust the examination for students with special needs: how to interpret the stated learning outcomes to allow students with special needs to comply with them even if this does not seem obvious at first sight (for instance the ability of a person in a wheelchair to load a lorry).

This case study comprises the following sections:

(a) Chapter 2 provides general information on changes of the assessment approach;

(b) Chapter 3 provides insights into assessment in practice, with particular attention to ensuring the quality and coherence of assessment while allowing for deviation from standard assessment;

(c) Chapter 4 rounds off the case study with references to current and future challenges in evaluation.

CHAPTER 2.
General information on changes of the assessment approach

2.1. Historical developments

In the early 1990s, steps were taken to give schools more freedom and autonomy in the organisation and delivery of VET. Important drivers for this were the felt need for improving the image of VET (which was considered low), and the need for improved cooperation with the world of 4work (IVA, 2012). This was provided by a comprehensive legal foundation in the Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs (WEB, VET act) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995). Before the introduction of the WEB, assessment was dominantly organised sectorally. Each sector had its own way of assessment and national sectoral organisations played a large role in organising the examinations. In the apprenticeship system, the exams were nationally organised by the economic sectors. In the school-based systems, the schools themselves were responsible for the quality of the exams. Enforced by the WEB, the 1990s, can be characterised as harmonisation of the assessment approach, leading to more school-based exams and less national, central exams. School-based exams were considered as less expensive, they allow (intermediate) and flexible assessment of modules and leave schools with more flexibility (IVA, 2012, pp. 10–11).

The WEB introduced a national qualification structure and defined which qualifications were offered by the VET schools. For each qualification, learning outcomes [*eindtermen*] were defined centrally. These learning outcomes, as set by the Ministry were leading the assessment process (IVA, 2012, p. 14). The schools became responsible for the organisation, preparation and implementation of exams and the awarding of diplomas. The schools, however, made use of external assessment organisations (that used to conduct the sectoral central exams in the apprenticeship systems) to externally validate the assessment. As indicated by the Inspectorate, there were main challenges with the quality of the exams (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2001; Onderwijsraad, 2001). Aspects mentioned concerned the lack of professional expertise within the VET schools regarding assessment and the fact that assessments were oriented towards the reproduction of knowledge rather than the assessment of competences. In 2004, a central assessment organisation (Quality Centre Examination [KwaliteitsCentrum Examinering (KCE)] was established with uniform quality standards. This, however, did not solve the quality concerns and led to overregulation and huge administrative burdens with

limited effect on the quality of examination. In 2007, the supervision of exams shifted to the Inspectorate and new quality standards were defined (IVA Onderwijs /Kennispunt MBO Onderwijs & Examinering, 2022, p. 19). Still, however, the administrative burden on the side of the VET schools is considered extensive and in 2012 yet another quality framework was implemented making the supervision more proportionate.

In 2010, the Educational Council (*Onderwijsraad*) published a report (Onderwijsraad, 2010) in which it concluded that the esteem of VET diplomas is still considered low. It also proposed measures to increase the value (such as more objective information on performance; more engagement of key partners; less use of validation of prior learning; stronger role of the assessment boards). Supported by this study, in 2011 a renewed focus on craftmanship was initiated by the Ministry (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2011), aiming for a higher esteem of VET, more tailored VET provision, more orientation to workplace learning and also increasing the quality of assessment to strengthen the value of VET diplomas. It proposed four measures to contribute to increasing the value of diploma's by focusing on the quality of examination:

(a) **Introduction of central examinations of the listening and reading skills for the Dutch and English as well as arithmetic performed by the Examination Board.** This was gradually introduced, making use of pilot-years. The discussions concerning the centralised exams for arithmetic led to the approach being abandoned: Since 2015, the results of the centralised exams are no longer taken into account in the overall assessment.

(b) **To improve the examination in relation to professional requirements, work was done on sectoral examination standards, so-called examination profiles.** This consisted of joint work between the labour market stakeholders and the VET schools, describing who would take responsibility in the assessment of students. During a pilot-phase, these more uniform examination profiles were tested, but it never led to legal embedding as the impact on increasing the quality of assessment was never proven.

(c) **Commitment to more joint development of exams and purchase of exams from national exam banks by VET institutions.** This measure resulted in VET institutions increasingly developing exams jointly. To this end, they set up external foundations and partnerships (so outside of the VET institutions), in which schools and teachers together with employers construct exams. The VET institutions then purchase the exams from these external organisations. In addition, VET schools were also able to purchase from private, commercial parties. Currently, as concluded by a forthcoming study (IVA Onderwijs /Kennispunt MBO Onderwijs & Examinering, 2022, p. 24)

'there are more than sixty exam suppliers on the market that offer exam instruments for qualifications, electives (*Keuzedelen*), VET certificates and institutional exams. Some of them have their roots in the old knowledge centers (*Kenniscentra*) and national vocational training bodies'.

(d) **For the examination of vocational subjects, VET institutions may only use exams that comply with a national quality mark.** The idea was that the overall quality of exams increased through a higher level of professionalisation at the side of the exams suppliers, but also at the side of the VET institutions (examination boards). As envisaged by the national quality mark, the exams were not only checked beforehand, but were also potentially externally checked afterwards (by the Inspection). In the end, the national quality mark was never established as there are sufficient checks and balances in place to assure that the examination tools are of sufficient quality ([1]).

The VET schools (both public and privately funded), supported by the Ministry, developed their own agenda to improve the quality of examination (MBO Raad et al., 2015), focussing on increasing the quality and validity of the examination tools (i.e. exams), strengthening the Examination Boards in the VET schools and improving the professionality of those involved in conducting exams. In 2019, Stichting validering examens mbo (VEMBO) ([2]) was established to guarantee the quality and validity of exams (both those developed by exams suppliers and developed jointly by VET schools).

The development of an own agenda on examination marked a significant change: VET schools took more responsibility in assuring and improving the quality of exams and relied less on structures established top-down (as was done in the past). Other developments that emphasise the same orientation was the development of the 'Quality network VET' (*Kwaliteitsnetwerk mbo*) ([3]). Furthermore, the sector itself developed a number of toolkits to support the expertise-development in the VET sector (especially focussing on the Examination Boards) ([4]). The shift to more VET institution-responsibility also shifted the attention from working on the institutional set-up around examination, to solving more practical issues within the VET schools concerning examination. A key challenge for many VET schools remained the examination in the real occupational context.

([1]) It was already advised not to develop a national quality mark in 2011. See: (van der Kooy et al., 2011)

([2]) https://www.stichtingvalideringexamensmbo.nl/

([3]) https://www.kwaliteitsnetwerk-mbo.nl/

([4]) See: Toolkit kwaliteitsborging voor examencommissie - Onderwijs en examinering

With the changes in the qualification structure and the qualification files in 2016 (Act of the changing the WEB) (focusing more on core tasks), more and more emphasis was placed on assessment in the real occupational context, meaning that students' knowledge, skills and competences had to be assessed in a real occupational situation instead of in the school, or a simulated work environment. For the work-based pathway (bbl) this is done in the company in which the student learn and work, for the school-based pathway (bol) this is done in the company where they do their internship. The companies involved in the bbl and bol pathways are all assessed on whether the student can learn the core tasks and work processes in that working environment (this is done by SBB (SBB, 2022)). VET schools struggled with how to organise this this the many different occupations, different core tasks and different companies in which students learn and work. The main overarching challenges identified concerned (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016):

(a) Lack of a vision on assessment in the real occupational context;
(b) Not always possible to conduct the assessment in real occupational context;
(c) Dealing with diversity in companies and maintaining comparability of assessment in real occupational contexts;
(d) Assure an independent and objective assessment;
(e) Assure the quality of the external examinators;
(f) VET schools have difficulties keeping oversight on assessments (not always present).

While VET institutions progressed in the years after 2016 in how they deal with examination and assessment, these six overarching challenges still remain valid today. In addition, new issues emerge. A 2018 publication of the Educational Council (Onderwijsraad) (Onderwijsraad, 2018) mentioned a number of critical issues in examinations, also related to VET:

(a) There is a disbalance between formative assessment and summative examination. Current practice does insufficiently allow formative assessment.
(b) The use of external exams and assessors (both the centralised exams and the externally purchased exams) relieved VET teachers in their (examination) tasks, but it also reduced their engagement and professionalisation in examination and their engagement in the education and training in general (Onderwijsraad, 2018, p. 22). Hence, while the WEB stimulated the autonomy of VET schools, after 25 years of development, this autonomy in examination is under pressure as a result of outsourcing examination to external institutions and centralised examination.

In this context, the new assessment framework (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021), that is regularly updated and revised to respond to changing needs and

views on quality in VET, responds to these identified challenges and expands the flexibility for VET institutions to use additional evidence besides the final examination. In 2021, a learning network of educational teams in VET schools was established to explore how to make use of this flexibility ([5]).

2.2.   The dominant assessment forms applied in IVET

In defining the *what* (content of VET programmes and qualifications) there are two key institutions. The SBB is facilitating the process of developing qualification files and drafts the learning outcomes. The second important institutional pillar defining the *what* in VET is the Inspectie van het Onderwijs (inspectorate of education) ([6]). It is responsible for the inspection and review of schools and educational institutions and assesses the assessment procedures as well (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020). The *how* of VET programmes and examination is principally determined by the autonomous VET schools. While there are national exams for (some of) the general subjects (see later); the examination of occupation-specific subjects and learning content is the responsibility of the VET schools. VET schools have three routes to arrive at assessment tools for assessing in the real occupation context meeting validity requirements (Validering Examens MBO, 2018):

(a)   Route 1: purchase exams at a certified provider;
(b)   Route 2: self-construct exams based on collective agreements;
(c)   Route 3: external validation of self-constructed exams.

Throughout 20 years of development of examination, the dominance shifted from written exams, testing knowledge, to skills demonstration in the real occupational context. This is confirmed by the findings from the survey among VET providers that suggest that while the use of standardised approaches (e.g. multiple-choice or other closed test formats) and self-assessment of learners have stayed the same, there is an increase in the application of skills demonstration, individualised and flexible approaches (e.g. use of portfolios to demonstrate student progress) as well as digital assessment. The digital assessment, however, does not significantly change what is assessed, it only makes the assessment more efficient. The use of digital assessment in assessing in the real occupational context is not well developed as this would also run counter to the idea that the assessment of core tasks and work processes should not take place in simulated

[5]   https://onderwijsenexaminering.nl/examinering/lerend-netwerk-anders-verantwoorden-diplomabesluit/

[6]   https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl/

environments. Digital tools are however used for training purposes. Also, digital tools are used to register the outcomes of the assessment by the external assessor to directly communicate the results with the VET institution and employer for validation.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures and closure of companies made it impossible for VET schools to follow the regular examination plans. The Ministry provided the schools with the freedom to conduct the exams in a different and tailored manner, also allowing gathering proof of mastering core tasks within the education and training provided instead of assessing it only in formal exams. While receiving emphasis in the COVID-19 pandemic, VET school have long been interested in using information other than exams in order to provide evidence that VET students comply with the stated learning outcomes in qualification files. The legal arrangements and quality assurance concerns, however, make this difficult (IVA, 2020). The 2021 Assessment framework for the Inspectorate's supervision of the VET sector (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021) clarifies how the Inspectorate looks at the decisions of VET schools (and their Examination Boards) concerning the evidence used for diploma decisions. It indicates that VET schools have the liberty to use other evidence besides exams unless the Examination Board can guarantee the quality of the additional evidence (Kennispunt MBO onderwijs & examinering, 2021).

2.3. Assessment of general subjects and transversal skills and competences

To improve the transition from VET to higher education, for some subjects, Dutch language and basic maths and English (only mbo level 4 – equivalent to EQF level 4), examination was taken away from the schools and this is now done centrally. This introduction of obligatory central examinations was carried out in phases; starting with a pilot in 2014-2015; fully implementing central examinations on these general subjects by 2017-2018 (College voor toetsen en Examens, 2014). While initially also arithmetic was proposed for centralised examination, the results of the central examination are not considered in the overall assessment of the VET student. Civic and citizenship skills (also an obligatory part of all VET qualifications) are not assessed by the VET schools, but the VET schools have to indicate whether the VET student met the citizenship requirements.

Transversal skills are traditionally conceptualised in the Netherlands as 'competences'. The role of 'competences' in the Dutch VET system is subject to longstanding debates how to operationalise competence-based-education and training ('*competentie-gericht onderwijs*') since its initial introduction in 2004

(Klarus, 2020). The introduction of this is regarded by many practitioners and researchers a failure that is partly solved in the qualification files that focus less on uncontextualised competences and more on the core tasks and work processes relevant for a specific occupation. Still however competences are referred to in the qualification files as supportive to the behaviour the student will have to be able to demonstrate. The transversal skills and competences (such as team work) are not centrally examined, nor is there a systematic approach to asses those skills and competences in different occupational contexts. These competences are however assessed within the real occupational context of the VET student as a part of assessing the mastery of overall core tasks and work processes. For instance, a health care assistance needs to show that s/he is able to support others in caring tasks. This implies as well that s/he is able to work in teams, communicate clearly and show empathy.

2.4.   Main drivers influencing the specific changes in assessment

After the introduction of the WEB (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1995), the quality of exams was a continuous concern (see section 2.1). The quality of exams was closely linked to the **esteem of the VET diplomas and the esteem of the VET sector** as a whole: Is the VET system leading to quality graduates? Over the last 25 years, numerous changes have been introduced concerning the quality framework for exams, the institutional responsibility of assuring and guaranteeing the quality of exams, and responsibility to conduct exams (centralised, or by the VET schools).

In addition, a key driver concerning the focus of exams are **overarching changes in the VET system**. Over the years more and more emphasis has been placed on the skills and competence components: VET students have to be able to conduct the core tasks as defined in the qualification files. This means that assessment shifted from written exams (focusing on the knowledge component) to proving mastery of core tasks in a real occupational context. Also the knowledge components had to be assessed more and more within the real occupational context.

A last main driver was the **search for validity of exams**. The historical development showed various attempts to achieve examination quality from a top-down perspective before a more bottom-up approach was used for assuring the quality of the examination tools developed by exams suppliers and VET schools jointly.

All in all, due to increased regulation of examination processes, the value of VET diplomas is now better assured. As a result of this, however, the organisational complexity of examination and complying with the different sets of rules and regulations increased, leading to heavy administrative burdens for the VET schools. It also reduced flexibility in examination and combining formative and summative assessments. The sector is seeking to find a new balance that allows more flexibility without reducing the esteem.

CHAPTER 3.
Assessment in practice

In this chapter, the focus is only on the examination of core tasks and work processes. These examinations are in a majority of cases being organised in the real occupational context. The key concept underlying the examination of core tasks and work processes is 'authenticity', meaning that the examination should take place in an authentic work situation. VET institutions sometimes have at their disposal extensive simulation environments which allow them to provide an authentic work situation ([7]), but usually the authentic work environment is secured by having the examination take place in the workplace.

3.1. Quality and coherence of assessment

3.1.1. National standards and reference points

The reference documents for assessment are descriptions of the core tasks and work processes in the qualification files. These are defined per qualification and form the basis for examination tools that are developed by exams suppliers or consortia of VET schools. These examination tools are externally validated and certified. The external certification institutes have to comply with specific quality criteria (as managed by VEMBO and assessed by certifying authorities ([8])). The box provides an overview of the current criteria related to the process of developing examination tools and the organisational requirements.

Box 1.   **Criteria related to the process of developing examination tools and the organisational requirements**

Process requirements
The process requirements are requirements for the working method (processes) on the basis of which an examination instrument (tool) comes into existence. This

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([7])   See for instance the restaurant and hotel facilities of VET institution De Rooi Pannen, where real guests are served: https://www.derooipannen.nl/open-dagen/maak-kennis-met-onze-afdelingen/mbo-horeca/tilburg

([8])   https://www.stichtingvalideringexamensmbo.nl/; there are a number of certifying authorities: Autoriteiten - Stichting Validering Examens mboStichting Validering Examens mbo

concerns the working method of the organisation that develops examination instruments. The following process requirements must be met.

The organisation demonstrates that the quality of the working method is guaranteed by a description of a number of processes. It is described:

- how the process of developing and assessing examination tools has been established;
- how the separation between developers and assessors is organised in the organisation. This description includes:
  - o the division of tasks between developers and assessors
  - o the procedure followed to ensure independence and separation between the two tasks to guarantee
- how education and business are involved in the development of the examination instruments in the context of the connection to professional practice and the determining the traceability of the requirements to be examined to an examination instrument
- which quality criteria are used, and how the quality criteria applied in the development of examination instruments are operationalised. This is related to:
  - o the questions/assignment
  - o the answers/judging criteria
  - o the cut-off point
- how the assessment instruments are developed, whereby the guideline is applied securing an appropriate relationship between the qualification requirements, the question/assignments, the answer options and assessment criteria;
- how the definitive examination instruments are determined and agreed upon.

Organisation requirements

The organisational requirements are requirements for the organisational set-up of the institution that develops examination instruments. The following organisational requirements must be met:

- Relevant documentation and data are managed in an orderly fashion and, if applicable application made available.
- Relevant documentation and data are managed in an orderly fashion and, if applicable, made available.
- It has been established what the organisations' working method is to be aware of current legislation and regulations and to implement the working method for assessing and monitoring the consequences of any changes in those legislation and regulations for its own working method.
- It is described which criteria are used to safeguard the expertise of the persons who construct and determine examination instruments. The requirements that an authority imposes on the persons who develop and assess examination instruments can be demonstrably found. It must also be demonstrated that

persons who are actually deployed to develop or assess examination instruments meet these requirements.
- The body carries out an internal quality audit every year. A report will be made of this that is publicly available.
- A complaints procedure has been set up and demonstrably followed.
- The organisation takes organisational and technical measures to protect the examination instruments and/or assessment instruments against unauthorized release, loss, unauthorized use and unauthorized changes.

Source: (Validering Examens MBO, 2017a, 2017c)

In addition to these organisational requirements, there is a wide set of product requirements for examination instruments to assure that the instruments comply with the current Inspection-quality assessment framework (*Onderzoekskader*, for 2021: (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021) and that ensure uniformity of examination tools. The requirements describe amongst others (Validering Examens MBO, 2017b):

(a) how the product is developed;
(b) how the labour market stakeholders are involved in the development;
(c) which core tasks and work processes are assessed by the instrument;
(d) what is the final product of the examination;
(e) that the examination does not assess more than what is described in the core tasks and work processes;
(f) the assignment is clear and the language is appropriate for the student
(g) how the final assessment is conducted and how the performance of the student is scored;
(h) how all relevant information is provided.

3.1.2. VET school approach to quality examination

How VET is delivered and how progress is assessed is the responsibility of the school. VET schools need to ensure that the assessment complies with the requirements as set by the government and that all processes are quality assured. This responsibility of the schools is introduced with the WEB, but it required continuous developments to shape the examination, especially of the work-practice. A key aspect in the quality assurance is that there is a clear cut between the education and training on the one hand, and the examination on the other (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021). For this purpose, the exams are conducted by external assessors using examination tools that are developed by external organisations being again externally certified (see Section 3.1.1). As indicated earlier, VET schools have three routes to arrive at assessment tools meeting validity requirements (Validering Examens MBO, 2018):

(a) Route 1: purchase exams at a certified provider
(b) Route 2: self-construct exams based on collective agreements
(c) Route 3: external validation of self-constructed exams.

The quality of the alignment of intended learning outcomes and assessment is assured for each of these routes through the external certification of the examination tools. There a specific procedures and rules the external assessors have to follow to certify an examination tool, looking both at the examining institution and the examination tool itself (Validering Examens MBO, 2017c). The coherence of exams between VET schools is assured as a result of following these routes: They use the same exams, either purchased from exams suppliers or developed jointly by VET schools.

VET schools struggle with the examination in the work-practice, especially as work-practices are not the same for all VET students and hence there is a tension between tailoring the examination to the specific work-practice and standardisation of the exams. Each school will have to find its own balance between tailoring and standardisation, doing justice to the qualifications files (core tasks and work processes), the Inspection quality frameworks, and the local (labour market) context. While exams might differ between exams suppliers, VET institutions, regions, workplaces, the checks and balances in place assure that they all measure and report on the performance of the students in line with the descriptions of the learning outcomes in the qualification files.

For adult learners, there are possibilities for validation of prior learning and exemption of specific courses and exams. The student can file a request at the Examination Board and will have to provide evidence that the core tasks and work processes as described in the qualification file are covered by previous experience (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020, p. 27). Hence for validation of prior learning, the intended learning outcomes still serve as reference point and the assessment method (i.e. exam) can be substituted by other evidence on meeting the requirements.

In terms of alignment between VET delivery and the assessment, for both, the core tasks and work processes as described in the qualification files are the reference point. While the VET school was the autonomy to design the *how* of delivery and can decide on the *how* of assessment, it needs to provide proof that this is aligned to the descriptions in the qualification files.

3.2. Deviating from the standard assessment: issue of special needs

An interesting field of study in this regard is to what extend schools can adjust the examination for students with special needs: How to interpret the stated learning outcomes to allow, for example, students with special needs to comply with them while this at first sight does not seem obvious (for instance loading a lorry for someone in a wheelchair) (MBO Raad et al., 2018; Stoutjesdijk & Broek, 2016). The specific case of how to adjust examination practice for special needs students is a test case for VET schools and the Inspectorate concerning how much freedom there is in adjusting examination and interpreting the learning outcomes. Still this issue is subject to heavy debates and needs for guidance and discussion as is evidenced by the requested participation of more than 300 representatives from VET schools in a conference on this issue (27 January 2022) ([9]).

A distinction can be made between the centralised exams (Dutch, English, arithmetic) and the occupation-specific exams, organised decentralised by the VET schools. For the centralised exams, the rules and procedures on how to deviate from the norm are clearly described by the Board of Tests and Examinations (College voor Toetsen en Examens (CvTE)) ([10]). VET schools face challenges concerning tailoring the occupation-specific parts of the qualifications. The adjustments to the examination have to be approved by the Examination Board. The decisions by the Examination Board of the VET schools can be checked by the Inspectorate. It is this Inspectorate check that is feared by VET institutions as they often lack the expertise and confidence to make decisions to go against the existing practice.

There are three ways of adjustment (Kennispunt MBO Onderwijs & Examinering & Expertisecentrum Inclusief Onderwijs, 2020):
(a) **Adjustment of the conditions for examination** (including allowing support tools). An example is that an exam can be split in parts for a student with chronic fatigue syndrome. This type of adjustment usually does not lead to challenges and discussions.
(b) **Adjustment of the form and content of the examination**: this concerns that the student uses a technique or tool that is not specified in the qualification file. An example is a one-armed student in hospitality who uses a tray to serve drinks. Here the issue is really to interpret the described learning outcomes and see how an adjustment still does justice to the learning outcomes.

([9]) https://onderwijsenexaminering.nl/agenda/webinar-passend-examineren/

([10]) Deelnemers met een ondersteuningsbehoefte - Examenbladmbo.nl

(c) **Adjustment by which the requirements of the qualification file are no longer met**: An example is a student training to become a health care assistant that due to chronic fatigue syndrome and muscular problem cannot lift and wash patients. In this case, the VET school provides a declaration that the student meets all requirements except those concerning heavy physical labour. This last type of adjustment can be problematic as it can undermine the value of the qualification on the labour market as a proxy that the holder is able to conduct a number of core tasks.

The adjustment needs to strike a balance between on the one hand, doing everything to enable the student to obtain her/his qualification and providing him/her with an equal opportunity, and on the other hand, guaranteeing that a VET qualification remains a reference point in the labour market as the set of skills that all starting practitioners have. Adjusting the examination is therefore not only an educational matter, but is also related to trust in qualifications held in the labour market. Hence, this is also a concern for the intake process of students with special needs in VET programmes. Already at this stage an assessment will have to be made whether the student will be able (and in what way) to comply with the requirements as described in the qualification file (Stoutjesdijk & Broek, 2016). VET schools can ask for guidance and advice on specific cases at the established Kennispunt MBO Onderwijs & Examinering (Knowledge point VET Education and Examination) ([11]).

([11]) https://onderwijsenexaminering.nl/

CHAPTER 4.
Outlook

Throughout the 25-year period of the WEB, examination remained a problematic issue. As early as 2001, an inspection report stated that 'the quality of examination is concerning for many years. The VET programmes reviewed in recent years on average in half of the cases, the examination did not meet the requirements. The level of exercises were significantly lower than the stated learning outcomes and the examinations did not cover the full content' (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2001, p. 26; IVA, 2012, p. 11). Around the 2010s the quality of examination was still considered below expectations because the examination was not standardised (Onderwijsraad, 2010). The examination remained a key topic ever since, mostly focusing on solving practical challenges and clarifying how the inspection would review the schools on this topic (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016) (MBO Raad, 2020).

This continuous struggle with the examination should be seen in the perspective of the VET schools growing into their autonomy and responsibility. While they were given this responsibility from the start of the WEB, they still have to develop the maturity level to take the autonomy and responsibility and – at times – challenge the decisions of the inspection given that they have good reasons to conduct the examination different from the prescribed format. However, this growing maturity is also reverted in the sense that examination is outsourced to external institutions and that for Dutch, English and Arithmetic centralised exams are developed. In recent years, also sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic in which VET institutions showed they are capable in making use of more freedom in adjusting examination (also using formative exams and other evidence than the final exams), the VET institutions seem to arrive at a maturity level that is appropriate to maintain a high esteem of VET diplomas.

All and all, when overlooking 25 years of development, we see two opposing tendencies having different dimensions, where the Dutch VET system is trying to strike the right balance.

Table 1.   **Two opposing tendencies in Dutch VET examination practice**

Flexibility and tailored approaches	Standardisation
Autonomy of VET schools (and Examination Boards) in examination	Outsourcing responsibility for examination
Expertise in-house	Expertise in external institutions
Use of more formative assessment and alternative evidence of performance	Emphasis on final examination

Source: Author.

The issue of examination and the quality of exams will also in the future remain a core topic and it will see new developments and initiatives to increase the quality while at the same time allow for flexibility and tailored approaches. It will be interesting to see how the VET sector will deal with the increasing flexibility in offering (smaller) certificates; focusing more on adult learning and dealing more and more with accreditation of prior learning and how these developments again call for a rebalancing on the above opposing tendencies to secure high quality of examination.

List of abbreviations

CvTE	College voor Toetsen en Examens [Board of Tests and Examinations]
KCE	KwaliteitsCentrum Examinering [Quality Centre Examination]
MBO	Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs [vocational education and training]
OCW	Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap [Education, Culture and Science]
VEMBO	Stichting validering examens mbo [Foundation validation Examination VET]
VET	vocational education and training
WEB	Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs [Act on VET and adult education]

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