Early leaving from vocational education and training

The Netherlands
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A. Policy context, definitions and statistics

Tackling the problem of pupils leaving school early (ESL) is one of the priorities of the Dutch government. The target is set: no more than 25,000 new early school leavers each year from 2016. Since 2002, the Action Plan to Reduce Drop-out Rates has already led to a reduction from 71,000 in 2001 to 38,600 for the 2010-2011 school year.

The Netherlands compares well with other European countries. Today, the Dutch ESL rate is some four percentage points below the EU average and the country has now met the 10% EU target on ESL. The rate has declined rapidly over the past decade. According to Eurostat data, the rate of ESL has gone down from 15.4% in 2000 to 9.1% in 2011. Measured according to the European definition, the Dutch target is 8% in 2020. The 2010 Government has decided on a more ambitious target than that for the EU, namely a maximum of 25,000 early school leavers by 2016 (1).

A.1. Legal framework and definition

Young Dutch people are subject to the compulsory school attendance requirement until the end of the school year in which they reach the age of 16. After that, they continue to be subject to the qualification obligation (2) until they are 18. Under-18s with no basic qualification are subject to the Compulsory Education Act. Enforcement is the responsibility of the local municipality. Over-18s are subject to the Registration and Coordination (RMC) legislation, which is enforced regionally.

Whenever a pupil drops out during a school year without first obtaining a basic qualification, he or she will be considered an early school leaver. Every year on 1 October (T), the relevant officials check which pupils had been enrolled in the previous year (T-1). If a pupil is no longer enrolled on 1 October (T) and has not yet obtained a basic qualification, then he or she is an early school leaver according to the definition. Pupils who drop out during the school year but are once again enrolled on 1 October are not counted as early school leavers.

The Dutch government formally defines ESL as ‘a young person between 12 and 23 years of age who does not go to school and who has not achieved a basic qualification (i.e. a senior general secondary, pre-university, or level-2 secondary vocational diploma’ (and is not in education/obtained a basic qualification one year later).

(2) The qualification obligation was introduced on 1 August 2007. Since then, young people have been subject to a compulsory school attendance and qualification obligation. This means that they must remain in education until the age of 18 (previously 16) until they have achieved at least a basic qualification (i.e. at least a senior general secondary, pre-university, or level-2 secondary vocational diploma).
A.2. ESL data, a unique reference number for all learners

From 2005 new politics on ESL were formulated and a new student data system was introduced, offering complete, reliable and up-to-date figures. This data system made it possible to generate ESL-figures on national, regional level and for each municipality and district. This has been enabled through an allocation of ‘education number’ for every child. An ‘education number’ is a unique reference number that identifies each child in the Netherlands uniquely. It is intended to remain with them throughout their school career regardless of any change in school, local authority or region. This unique reference number makes it possible to track the progression of all students.

The system administering the ‘education number’ is known as BRON, the Basic Record Database for Education. Since 2005, it has been the only nationwide information system for recording learners and it is the same as the one used for school financing. Young people who are registered in the BRON system as being of compulsory school age but not attending education or training and not holding a basic qualification are classified as early school leavers. Schools and training institutions are obliged to provide accurate information to a ‘one-stop-shop’ called DUO information about participation to education. DUO is then in charge of pulling the information together on those who are active participants in education and training and those who have dropped out.

A.3. Annual school-leaver surveys

In addition to the BRON- and DUO-data, an annual school-leaver survey is carried out by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA). ROA has carried out these school-leaver surveys since the early 90s. For a number of sections of the questionnaires, the items for unqualified and qualified respondents are the same, allowing a comparison between the two groups for a number of key indicators. ‘Qualified’ in this case refers to school-leavers who left school with a diploma, regardless whether this constituted a basic qualification or not.

A.4. Interactive ESL tool

To make access to ESL data even easier, ‘a Drop-out Explorer’ (3) has been created. The Explorer is an interactive tool that provides quantitative data on ESL. The Explorer compares ESL rates and numbers between regions or educational institutions and can display figures for different school years side by side. This makes it easy to compare performance of different regions, cities, schools and training institutions. Such data is also linked to socio-economic data for each region, city and neighbourhood including: demographics, ratio of ‘native Dutch’ citizens to ethnic minorities, unemployment rates and social benefits.

(3) http://www.vsvverkenner.nl/english/
A.5. ESL in secondary VET

ESL in VET (*) is defined and organized the same way as in general education. However, the Dutch VET schools concentrate a much higher percentage of early school leavers than secondary schools of academic/general orientation. In 2010/2011, the ESL rate of 7.2% in VET schools was around seven times higher than the rate in academically orientated secondary schools of which the rate was just 1%.

In addition, VET schools have succeeded in making reductions in ESL rates over the past seven years, but not at a rate of other secondary schools (the ESL rate in VET schools has declined from 9.3% in 2005/2006 to 7.2% in 2010/2011). Thus the national ESL programme has placed particular attention to VET schools, as a way of reducing the overall rate of ESL in the country.

(*) VET is defined here as senior secondary VET (mbo).
B. Aspects that may influence dropping out in VET

The particular problems of VET schools – on a system level - in relation to ESL have been: insufficient ‘care/support’ provisions, poor permeability between study paths, high dropout rates during transition from one level of VET to another, different schools providing pre-VET and VET courses and early tracking (the choice of vocational vs. academic pathway is made already at the age of 12). Also the availability, quality and guidance of apprenticeships are an issue that needs attention.

The majority of students drop out during the first year of their VET studies. In all, school-related causes are reported most often as the main reason for dropping out (45%). The second place is for physical and mental health complaints (18%). (5)

Main reasons for dropping out, by education level

- School-related causes
- Physical or mental health complaints
- Personal problems
- Labour market
- Other

GSE = General Secondary Education. PVSE = junior Sec Vocational Education. SVE = Senior Secondary VET. A basic qualification is a diploma at the SVE level 2 (ISCED 3) or higher.

B.1. Work placements and apprenticeships

On average 50% of the practical training within VET is carried out in the company. This asks for uniform and clear criteria to ensure the quality of the practical experience. Within SBB, the Foundation for Cooperation on VET and Labour Market, educational institutes and social partners make therefore joint agreements on work placements. SBB is charged with enabling an optimal match between VET education and the labour market. Established on request of the Dutch Ministry of Education, SBB is responsible for cross-regional and cross-sectoral management of themes relating to VET qualifications, examinations, work placements and efficiency.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, the employers’ organisations VNO-NCW/MKB (SME) Netherlands and the MBO Council together with the cooperating centres of expertise on vocational training, education and the labour market laid down agreements on work placements, in the form of a protocol (6).

Stagemarkt.nl is the matching site for VET that brings together VET students and training companies. On a monthly basis, SBB publishes opportunities and availability for work placements and apprenticeships in the Netherlands by sector (7).

B.2. Labour market and social policy issues

According to the latest figures published by Statistics Netherlands, seasonally adjusted unemployment grew by 16 thousand in June 2013 to reach 675 thousand. One in five unemployed in the Netherlands is a youngster. Unemployed youth do not receive benefits until they are 27 years old; instead, they are offered a combination of work and education by their municipality. Recently, a new Action Plan to tackle Youth Unemployment was launched. It will invest € 50mln in schemes to bring down youth unemployment in 2013 and 2014. The most important pillar of this action plan is the re-introduced School ex programme 2.0, that will invest € 25mln to keep VET students longer in education, supply apprenticeships and work placements and transfer unemployed youngsters towards the labour market.

This initiative was very successful during the 2009 economic crisis. It aims specifically at senior secondary VET students and schools.

Elements include:

- keeping youngsters with a VET diploma longer at school in order to obtain a higher qualification;
- making it easier for students to change tracks: for VET students in a course with low labour market prospects towards a course that offers a better job outlook;

(6) http://www.s-bb.nl/work-placements.html
In Dutch: http://www.kansopwerk.nl/barometer.html
• seducing youngsters that apply for a VET course with low job prospects, to switch towards a course with better job outlook.

B.3. Individual reasons that may influence the decision to discontinue VET

With the focus on the prevention of ESL in the EU and Netherlands, the public image of ESL tends to be negative: youngsters without a basic qualification have 'little prospects on the labour market and are prone to social exclusion and criminality’. Relatively little attention is paid to the facts and possibilities of curative measures. But, as recent ROA- and ecbo-studies show (8), many ESL return to education after some time. 13% of all dropouts indicate that they regret their decision to abandon school. These 'returners' often have a different view on ESL. They preferred work above study or travel or were faced with personal problems that needed time to sort out. In order to help and facilitate these youngsters, ESL should no longer be seen as the end of a learning-career, but rather as a part of it.

Some facts on these 'returners':

• Every year more than 20.000 youngsters without a basic qualification return to school, after a minimum one-year absence period.

• More than one-third of ESL returns to school within three years. A pause of one year is the most common.

• Returners prefer to go to senior secondary VET, a small part chooses higher education (HE), general secondary education (HAVO/VWO) or adult general secondary education (VAVO).

• A relative high percentage of ESL from secondary general education and the higher levels of secondary VET find their way back to school. A relative low percentage of youngsters with a problematic social background/ poor families return to school.

• Youngsters with an ethnic background - and women in particular - return relatively often to school.

B.4. Measures

The consistent theme of the Dutch preventive ESL approach is the collaboration between the 'golden triangle' of the government, municipalities and schools. Together they are responsible for reducing ESL numbers. This collaboration is set down in long-term covenants per region, while the national government initiates, stimulates and co-ordinates. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science evaluates policy and co-ordinates with other departments.

The results of the agreements and best practices per school are published online, which motivates and stimulates all parties involved.

B.5. New management model: account managers

The ESL- programme is managed through six ‘account managers’ employed by the unit in charge of the programme at the ministry of education. Each account manager has several regions which they are in charge of. They negotiate the agreements with the regional representatives, monitor progress, provide assistance and support for their regional, local and school level actors, facilitate exchanges of experiences with other regions or schools and hold regular meetings with key people from the region. A steering committee meeting, chaired by the local alderman for education, together with school directors and other actors, is held twice a year. When necessary, additional contacts are made with account managers.

B.6. Funding

- A lump-sum fee was allocated to regions, which have had the freedom to use the fund in the way they see best possible manner to fit local needs, although the funding is aimed at encouraging partnership approach to tackling the problem (partnerships between schools, municipalities, youth and care services, employers, etc.). This approach has been encouraged as schools and municipalities have a clearer idea of
the situation in their area (as opposed to national agencies) and can target particular problem schools.

- A school performance bonus is offered on a ‘no cure no pay’ basis. Schools receive a bonus of €2500 for every early school leaver less than in the reference year. In addition, the covenant partners can apply for grants for special regional programmes.

Recently these two sources of funding have been replaced by a funding based on the number of students in schools. Achievements on ESL are counted on relative (percentage-based) reductions in ESL not any more on absolute figures. As an additional funding for the period from 2008 to 2011, a so-called ‘Plus programme’ funding was made available for young people with particularly complex set of support needs. In 2012 this extra funding became an integral (‘mainstream’) part of the overall ESL funding framework.

B.7. Specific measures

The Dutch government has taken several measures to ensure that as many young people as possible obtain a basic qualification.

- **Qualification obligation**
  The qualification obligation was introduced on 1 August 2007. Since then, young people have been subject to a compulsory school attendance and qualification obligation. This means that they must remain in education until the age of 18 (previously 16) until they have achieved at least a basic qualification (i.e. at least a senior general secondary, pre-university, or level-2 secondary vocational diploma).

- **Personal education number**
  All pupils have been allocated an education number, which makes it possible to track them. Each pupil at a publicly funded secondary or secondary vocational school is registered in BRON (the Basic Records Database for Education) with a unique number, name, address, date of birth, school, and school type (see p. 3).

- **Digital Absence Portal**
  Since 1 August 2009, all schools have been obliged by law to register school absenteeism via the Digital Absence Portal. This has greatly improved the registration of school absenteeism and early school leavers. Truancy and missing school are often signs that a pupil is at risk of dropping out and it is important for those in touch with the pupil – the school, the parents, and the school attendance officer – to respond quickly and efficiently.

- **Care structure at school**
  The care structure at school and locally has been strengthened. The gap between education and care has become smaller in recent years, with improved coordination between the two. The growth in the number of care coordinators plays an important
role in this. In 2010, 95% of schools had one or more care coordinators. The provision of socio-educational services has become a basic facility at all schools. This systematic approach is an important advance in identifying personal and social problems among pupils at an early stage.

B.8. Measures, specifically aimed at ESL in VET

Improved career guidance provision throughout the student life so as to prevent students from making wrong course choices. Encouraging students to choose courses with better further study and employment opportunities. The Education minister wants VET colleges to improve information and communication about job prospects of courses they offer to students. She takes a hard line in this and wants to close down courses which don’t result in jobs. The country’s VET colleges offer 8,100 different courses, and 40% of these have fewer than 18 students, the minister said.

- Career orientation, guidance and ‘smooth transfer’ by ‘VM2-experiments’.
  There has been a decline in the number of early school leavers out after transferring from pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) to secondary vocational education (MBO). The transfer to a follow-up programme at a different school seems to be a major stumbling block for pupils at a school for pre-vocational secondary education. Some of them fail to register for a follow-up programme at a secondary vocational school. Of those who do make the transition, many drop out in their first few months at the new school. August 2008 saw the start of a VM2-experiment in which pupils in pre-vocational secondary education who wish to transfer to a secondary vocational programme do not need to switch to a different school. The aim of the experiment is to enable more pupils to achieve a basic qualification at secondary vocational level. Young people are supported during their move from relatively small and familiar pre-vocational secondary schools to much larger upper secondary schools. This has had a positive impact on ESL rates in many vocational schools across the country.

- Reducing the overall duration of VET courses but intensifying by increasing the amount of teaching time during the remaining academic years. This involves cutting down a number of VET courses from four to three years and others from three to two years. This measure is recently laid down by law (9).

- Review of the vocational qualification structure. The aim is to further optimize the quality of the current qualification structure, thereby increasing transparency, distinguishability and effectiveness. The review focuses primarily on the links between vocational education and the labour market. The implementation on VET-schools will come into effect by August 2015 (on a voluntary basis) or August 2016.

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(9)  [http://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/33187_wijziging_wet_educatie_en](http://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/33187_wijziging_wet_educatie_en)
• Improving the quality of VET by placing an ever-greater focus on high quality craftsmanship skills. See for example the recent SER-study ‘Handmade in Holland (10).

• Seeking a more accurate match between regional labour market demand(s) and available VET training courses. (Macro-effectiveness)

• Improvement of school management systems and practices.

• As a result of the economic crisis, there’s a shortage of work placements and internships. New policy measures include an action plan to tackle the increasing youth unemployment and the shortage of work placements. Together with SBB and employer-organizations, The Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad) pleads for a temporary subsidy for employers that want to provide work placements for VET students. The budget of the Action Plan Youth Unemployment should cover for this subsidy: “The shortage of work placements is critical and affects also the number of ESL. Employers are willingly to provide work placements, but are facing difficult times due to the economic crisis. A subsidy could help.

• To tackle the shortage of technology skills, a Technology Pact (11) was signed May 2013. One of the spearheads is to offer internships or combined work-study places to all students following a technology programme in senior secondary VET.


(11) http://www.techniekpact.nl/download/?id=1051
C. Conclusions

The Dutch preventive ESL policy has been successful, mainly because of regional cooperation powered by long-term covenants and the availability of comparable data which stimulates ‘peer pressure’. At the same time there’s room to improve (cross-) regional and sectoral cooperation in order to prevent ESL.

C.1. From prevention towards curation

Some schools put a lot of effort in ESL-curative activities, but this is not mainstream policy. Curative measures depend on the cooperation of all partners involved. As a result of decreased budgets, local authorities and the UWV (Employee Insurance Agency) have less means available for the reintegration and participation/guidance of youngsters and early school leavers. Also, it seems increasingly difficult to replace vulnerable students/ESL in special tracks. Schools apply stricter admission criteria, which could be a side-effect of the pressure of ESL-output related financing. An additional effect of the current economic crisis is the decreasing availability of work placements and internships in VET. At the same time, Dutch VET policy aims at more challenging and attractive VET, by raising standards and reducing overall duration of VET courses.

All in all, the bar is raised, but the low-hanging fruit is picked. The current challenge is to reach for the more challenging group early school leavers.