

## Development directions for senior secondary vocational education (MBO)

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### *Adult and Vocational Education Act now over 12 years old: time for reflection*

The Adult and Vocational Education Act (*Wet education en beroepsonderwijs*) was introduced in 1996. The most important reason for its introduction was to increase coherence in the broad range of vocational programmes available at senior secondary level, and to improve their connectedness with the variety of short courses particularly aimed at adult learners. A qualifications structure with two learning pathways (full-time and part-time) was introduced at four levels across four sectors (technology, social welfare, economics and agriculture). Most senior secondary vocational education (MBO) programmes found homes in Regional Training Centres (ROCs). ROCs were billed to become the cherished suppliers of the regional labour market, but they would also offer broad access to all. Not all publicly funded senior secondary vocational education (MBO) found its home in the ROCs. MBO programmes are also offered by Agricultural Training Centres (AOCs) and specialised institutions. There are also many privately-funded senior secondary vocational education (MBO) programmes, some of which are provided through distance learning. All of which makes senior secondary vocational education (MBO) a very broad and varied terrain that serves a variety of target groups and functions. This makes it a dynamic sector, too. The government, business and industry, preparatory education, follow-on education, the participants, the school governors, the teachers, society at large: all stakeholders have their own wishes and expectations of senior secondary vocational education (MBO). It is a sector with more than 600,000 students, and is therefore an important component of the education system. This exploratory study represents an extensive stock-take by the Education Council of the state of affairs in senior secondary vocational education (MBO); it is also a reflection on the Adult and Vocational Education Act more than 12 years after its inception. Has the Adult and Vocational Education Act achieved its aims, do the Regional Training Centres (ROCs) fulfil their duties, and what problems do they face along the way?

### *Study examines three-pronged qualification*

The focus maintained by the Education Council in this study was that of the three-pronged qualification. The Adult and Vocational Education Act provided that senior secondary vocational education (MBO) would provide a three-pronged qualification: a professional qualification, a qualification that can lead to further studies (transfer qualification), and a learning and citizenship qualification. The study examined which developments in the education system and beyond had consequences for these functions, and their mutual relationship. The Education Council has identified three clusters of developments that have had consequences for the exercise of those functions.

1. The position of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) in the education system as a whole:
  - a discussion of the desired levels and nomenclature.
  - the role of and the distinction between full-time and part-time programmes; and
  - the development and organisation of programmes for difficult learners, such as 'AKA programmes' (labour market-qualified assistant), and the strengthening of the care structure.
2. Verticalisation of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) by the reinforcement of the vocational sector in the form of VMBO-MBO-(VM2) transitions, and associate degree programmes targeted towards MBO-to-HBO transitions.
3. Strengthening of private contributions (both financial and organisational): intended privatisation of part of the ROC, e.g. citizenship, and parts of the BBL day release pathway for certain groups; the rise of in-company colleges and specialised colleges; the improved alignment of professional training with professional practice; and a strengthened influence by business and industry.

It is clear that some developments in particular are aimed at strengthening the professional qualification, while other developments are particularly beneficial to the transfer qualification and have this as their explicit aim. The learning and citizenship qualifications are becoming increasingly important, although some are more enthusiastic about the source document entitled *Leren, Loopbaan, Burgerschap* (Learning, Career, Citizenship) and the central demands made of language and arithmetic. It makes sense that various parties involved in senior secondary vocational education (MBO) lay a different emphasis on the developments observed. For business and industry, the important point is the strengthening of training for professional practice, while in preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) and higher professional education (HBO) the transfer function is in need of improvement. The interest in VM2 pathways and other projects aimed at strengthening the vocational sector is large.

### *Practical implementation varies*

Apart from a description of these general developments, the study also includes reports on how institutions offering senior secondary vocational education (MBO) programmes fulfil their three-pronged task in practice. A description of policy and practice at five institutions has been described: ROC West-Brabant, AOC Helicon, ROC Graafschap College, SVO (food industry college) and Amarantis Onderwijsgroep. The institutions examined place varying emphasis on how they deal with the three-pronged qualification; they recognise that it is difficult to meet all three requirements at the same time, but have differing views on how they implement these functions. They all have a different 'function mix'. The ROCs are unmistakably investing more in the transfer and citizenship qualifications than the AOC and SVO, which in turn are more strongly focused on the professional qualification.

### *The Netherlands scores well for the equal status of its learning pathways and the important position of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) in the education system*

To better appreciate the Dutch situation, a study was made of the functions fulfilled in other countries by the equivalents of Dutch senior secondary vocational education (MBO). For a number of aspects, the Dutch system of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) compares favourably with other countries. The first point to emerge is the equal status of the BOL vocational training pathway and the BBL day release pathway. In other countries, either the vocational training pathway (BOL) or the day release pathway (BBL) has more status than the other. It is expected that the current economic crisis will prove the value of the reciprocal relationship between these two pathways in practice. A second positive point is the attention given to transitions from senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO) and the dual qualification of the higher MBO programmes. Points that the Netherlands can learn from include the possibilities to mix vocational education more with general secondary education and to strengthen regional anchoring by engaging parties outside business and industry.

### *Three development directions: combinations with general education, verticalisation, utilisation of private learning facilities*

The study sets out a number of directions in which senior secondary vocational education (MBO) could develop in the coming years. Depending on the direction chosen, certain functions would either be strengthened or weakened. In an overarching view, the Education Council is pleased with the principle of the three-pronged qualification and therefore sees no reason to change it. It avoids the approach from being too one-sided, biased towards either business and industry, the institutions, further education or training, or society. The Education Council believes that the statutory anchoring also means that variety must be allowed in the way in which the relations between the three prongs take shape. This also fits in with the wide diversity in the demands of the target groups. Institutions should be able to further detail this variety by giving more or less emphasis to a certain direction.

- combination with general education, established from both education types (i.e. from a vocational component in senior general secondary education (HAVO)/pre-university education (VWO); more cooperation and alignment with secondary education and adult education;
- verticalisation (development in the direction of vertically organised vocational combined schools); or
- better utilisation of learning opportunities in business, and development of appropriate organisational forms (conditional outsourcing of components of the BBL day release pathway for certain target groups to commercial enterprises or training institutions, and the creation of more scope for influence from sector organisations, including funding opportunities).

The consequences of the preference for the exercise of one of the three functions will be diverse. New combinations between vocational education and general education could have positive consequences for the link with senior general secondary education (HAVO)/pre-university education (VWO)/higher professional education (HBO), but the question is whether these will strengthen the vocational and professional education sector. For the language and citizenship qualifications, new combinations between vocational education and general education could have beneficial effects because of the increased attention to languages, general competences, citizenship education, etc. New combinations would be less beneficial for the professional qualification because the focus on a clear professional profile would be reduced, and it would not be clear for employers what professional knowledge and training a candidate possesses. In theory, verticalisation would lead to a clearer professional profile and to better transitions (within the sector) from preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) and senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to higher professional education (HBO). There would probably be less focus on the learning and citizenship qualification, although you could also argue that the vocational education sector is the best place to acquire citizenship competences. It is, however, also important that non-profession-specific aspects are also dealt with during the citizenship qualification period. This includes subjects such as civics, political knowledge, faith, human rights, etc. Increased influence from

business and industry would be beneficial for the professional qualification because pupils are trained for a specific line of business where there is sufficient demand. This development, however, is unfavourable for the transition to higher programmes of study. The expectation is that the citizenship qualification does not score highly in its own right, and that it would only be given any attention whenever the profession required it.

Senior secondary vocational education (MBO) has a long and fascinating history which was given a big impulse by the introduction of the Adult and Vocational Education Act in 1996. The further development of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) will need to take account of the switching position, the central position of MBO in the education system, linked to the continued development of the Regional Training Centres (ROCs) with small, contact-intensive units, surrounded by a crown of diverse organisational forms for professional education. The three development directions will be helpful here: further development of the horizontal ties between senior secondary vocational education (MBO) and general education in both directions, complemented by vertical ties and a more systematic utilisation of learning opportunities in labour organisations.