

Quality in Colour

Building blocks for the future



MBO Quality Network

Preface

To progress from becoming aware of, to being aware of the quality of education, it takes courage to show one's colours and then the decisiveness to give colour to quality awareness. In a nutshell, this is the development the vocational education and training sector (VET, or *Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs (MBO)* in Dutch) has undergone in the Netherlands in recent years, partly thanks to the Quality Network.

Based on this philosophy, the Board of the Quality Network asked a number of external experts to take a critical look at the network's ambitions. What has been achieved in recent years and how can the network design a new quality cycle? You can read the results in this survey entitled 'Quality in Colour'.

The picture described in this publication can be compared to the picture presented by the Education Inspectorate. Generally speaking, the VET sector has come from a period where quality assurance was not working properly across the board: in 2012 the inspectorate concluded that quality assurance was not in order at 70% of the institutions. Improvements have certainly been made since then. The consecutive reports of the inspectorate show that the basis is now in order at most institutions, though there always is room for improvement. Over a somewhat longer period, we have noted that apart from the importance of properly functioning quality assurance systems, the inspectorate is also explicitly looking at quality culture. The same applies to quality awareness across the entire organisation and the marked effect it has on students.

Similar to the development of the quality of VET, the vision for quality also is in a state of flux. The view of the Education Inspectorate and that of the Quality Network are gradually moving closer together. However, there still are differences. The focus of the network is on strengthening the learning capability of teams and the associated quality culture whereas the focus of the inspectorate is on the assessment of study programmes, and the teaching team is not the object of supervision.

This publication should be read as a quality measurement *avant la lettre*. In this context, the network serves as a means of achieving the goal of quality awareness within the colleges. The primary consideration is not the uniform technique of systems, but rather the question of how everyone lends colour to the quality of education in their own way. For that matter, the title of this publication could also be *The Quality Network brings colour to Quality!*

Peter van Mulkom, *Chair, MBO Quality Network*

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Introduction

The report 'Quality in Colour' consists of three parts. The first part, written by Henny Morshuis and Patricia Brouwer, provides an overview of current developments in VET. It discusses developments in society that are relevant to VET and the increasingly larger role teaching teams are playing in vocational education. The central question is: what do these developments mean for the thinking on quality assurance?

The second part, written by Alieke Hofland and Anneke Westerhuis, describes the current status of quality and quality assurance in VET. This chapter is based on an in-depth analysis of the activities the network has undertaken in recent years. The authors were given access to audit reports and other activities of the network for this purpose.

The third part, a co-production of the authors of the first two parts, examines the future role of the MBO Quality Network. Is there a guiding perspective and what does it look like?

1

Developments around VET and educational quality

In this chapter the authors pursue a number of themes relevant to the development of VET, in order to extend trend lines into the future into content and the implications for quality assurance. This future outlook begins with a brief summary of the task of VET (1) as the starting point for describing the developments in and around VET and a survey of the implications of those developments for VET institutions (2). The concluding third paragraph answers the question about the meaning of these developments for the thinking on quality and the organisation of quality assurance in VET. To add more perspective to this question, we have also described some trends in the thinking on quality and quality assurance.

1.1 VET: a multi-layered playing field

Unlike the vocational education sector in many other countries, the Dutch VET sector operates in a multi-layered playing field; it is there for both students and the business community and it is anchored in a national education system:

- it must be accessible to students with diverse backgrounds and career orientations and is aimed at both developing their entry-level competence and their lifelong learning ability;
- it provides the connection to developments in the occupational field and the labour market, and involves businesses in the development and provision of educational programmes;
- it is anchored in the national education policy based on subject-matter orientation (qualification, selection, allocation) and based on follow-on learning pathways (intake and transfer).

All playing fields have their own dynamics. They are all important. All actors have their own requirements. Based on their own perspective, regarding the quality of education. It is up to the institutions to implement this both administratively and substantively. You could say that it is VET's task to serve multiple actors on three playing fields simultaneously.

Strategically, the implementation of that task is evaluated and updated by national bodies (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science), the social partners and the VET institutions represented by the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad).

Operationally, this task is largely vested in programme teams. Teams are accountable for the provision of education and for adjusting programmes in this triple dynamic.

1.2 Relevant developments in and around VET and their implications for education

In this paragraph we first look at the most important developments in the VET environment and then reflect on their potential impact on education.

The trends

1 *The diversity of the student population is increasing*

VET intake is diverse in terms of composition, level and cultural background. Even so, it remains an important task of VET institutions to qualify all incoming students not only from pre-vocational education (VMBO), but also from special secondary education (VSO) and practical training (PRO) to perform an occupation. In this context, issues such as preventing early school leaving and compatibility with the development level of young people, including those with a background in inclusive education, need particular attention. In the transition from VMBO to VET, especially the route from the basic vocational track to VET level 2 is vulnerable because of the difficult alignment and the declining number of students taking this route. It is conceivable that continuous learning pathways will be incorporated into VMBO in the long-term.

A second trend is the decline in the initial intake as a result of demographic contraction. This could set the wheels in motion to actively start looking for other target groups in secondary education (senior general secondary education - HAVO) and from outside the education sector. Routes that could be followed are increasing the market share in lifelong learning and a more flexible education logistics (such as information carriers, locations and certifiable units). The length of time students spend in VET could also increase due to a shift in labour market demand (more demand for more highly qualified staff) as a result of a larger internal transfer and the inherent pressure to increase the study success rates of the latter.

2 *The ability to respond rapidly to developments in the business community will become even more important*

The intended learning outcomes for VET have been collectively laid down to date (SBB, national qualification files). However, the pressure is mounting to align more to the requirements of the regional business community. It is quite conceivable that this trend will bring about a shift from determining content from a collective-national level to a more regional level. It is equally conceivable that VET institutions – more so than in the past – will pro-actively respond, jointly with the business community, to social themes such as sustainability, the circular economy and the energy transition. This is also aimed

at preventing employment in these areas from automatically flowing away to higher education. In what is known as ‘the race between education and technology’, this form of cooperation has often proved to be successful (Goldin & Katz, 2008).

Systemic shifts on the labour market towards level (upgrading, downgrading) and content (new vocations, other forms of carrying out an occupation) constitute a second trend; how should VET respond? The more active socio-economic role of large municipalities could prompt them to look at VET institutions as well; can VET operate as a change agent who supports the route towards the desired economic positioning of the region?

3 *Developments in society also affect VET*

Technological developments, multiculturalism, globalisation and integration, plus the imminent social divide, which cuts across VET. Given that this is visible in many corners of society, there will be increasing pressure on VET – and the network (of colleges) around VET – to play a more significant role in preparing all students to participate in society, especially because many policy areas and actors connect in VET. In the absence of other broadly operating institutions, there is room for VET institutions to fill that gap (Van den Toren, 2018).

4 *VET institutions in the lead:*

the government policy is both incident-driven and aimed at the long term. The long-term trend is that VET institutions will ‘take the lead’ in defining their social task, in association with regional partners. In the perspective of regional partners, VET is an economic



#1 Practice

School and business work together to create the vocational education of the future. Working in co-creation on hybrid education and other new forms of learning and training at the cutting edge of public and private collaboration.

power, integration driver, problem-solver and supplier/service provider. At the same time, the central government has not forgotten to use VET as a policy instrument or policy channel for multiple dossiers (social safety, internationalisation, social resilience, preventive healthcare etc.). The need for VET institutions to chart their own course in this multi-layered space is increasing proportionally. This requires room for manoeuvre and a vision on how to use it. This is a trend that has been recognised in the Administrative Agreement Trots, vertrouwen en lef (2018 - 2022).

5 Changing work practices based on a future-oriented vision for education

Due to the diversification of the study programmes on offer, differences between students, the shortage of teachers and the desire to offer more attractive education (bind and captivate), the whole-class approach to teaching has sparked debate. VET institutions are looking for other organisational forms, such as team teaching, multi-age and knowledge-deepening groups, and other teaching methods, such as modularisation and more intensive use of ICT, blended learning and variation in study locations (hybrid learning). A guiding line of thought is still lacking: educational vision, more involvement from the business community, changing student needs, the shortage of teachers or the need to reduce the complexity of the organisation?

6 Evidence-based working

Assigning responsibilities to teams and the broader application of ICT are responses to developments that are not specific to the VET sector. These trends are also occurring in other sectors. This equally applies to working with data and conducting research in and for one's own organisation. What Gibbons identified in 1994, is now occurring in VET: in organisations where the percentage of employees with a higher education background is rising, more knowledge from research is utilised and knowledge is developed in a more research-based manner. There is a good case for looking at these trends from the broad perspective of organisational development.

Potential implications of these trends for VET

The implications do not begin with the observation that the environment is changing (this has always been the case) but with the question about how VET institutions are responding to changing circumstances in the year 2019. What are the main implications?

1 Manager with own proactive agenda

An aspect that clearly stands out in the analysis is that a VET institution is acquiring a management role more so than in the past, both in terms of connecting the wishes of students and regional businesses and institutions, as well as in social terms. And in involving partners in implementing the institution's social task. To that end, institutions need to be able to translate external developments into the study programmes on offer and into the organisation of education. This requires VET institutions to:

- 1 build a strong information position regarding regional labour market developments;
- 2 translate information about students and knowledge of regional economic developments into the curriculum;
- 3 integrate the provision and development of study programmes (design capability) into the education process;
- 4 ensure short cycles for making agreements with partners, identifying priorities, implementing these choices in the study programmes and accounting for the results;
- 5 assign with careful thought (selection and operational) responsibilities across the levels of the institution, particularly relating to the programme teams;
- 6 reorient the definition of VET responsiveness; from defensive 'sponge' to proactive agenda-setter.

2 *Agility as an organisational principle*

In order to respond faster and more effectively to external and external changes, changes also need to be made to the structure and organisation of VET institutions. For a future-oriented organisation, four major movements are in scope:

- From organisation to organising. The still prevalent pyramid-shaped organisation structure will shift more towards processes and people;
- Network organisations: internal and external will become increasingly interconnected;
- Flattening of the organisation. You could say that everyone will in a sense become a manager in order to facilitate the necessary decentralisation of responsibilities and powers;
- Agility as an organisational principle in the form of teams.

3 *Teams as the driver*

When it comes to providing and developing educational programmes (based on external developments and agreements), programme teams are usually the first to come to mind. Teams are the drivers of education: they have to respond effectively to the specific requirements of the business community, to developments in intake and in the region, of the specific vocations, of their students. The challenge facing teams is to achieve the intended results, to deliver quality. They are required to carry this out using appropriate organisational forms and teaching methods at various locations (both physical and in an ICT environment) and to involve (multiple) practical experts.

This assumes teams who operate professionally with a broad range of individual and collective competencies. The question is whether this broad task assumes teams of a certain scale and under what conditions teams can fulfil these responsibilities, and whether teacher training programmes will sufficiently prepare them for that role.



1.3 Conclusions

Doing the right things the right way...

Fons van Wieringen once made the observation that compared to universities of applied sciences, VET institutions operate in a large and multifarious network. Besides many discussion partners, this also produces a well-filled gallery of sub-stakeholders. This makes a concept such as quality a difficult common denominator under which to engage in external dialogue. For many stakeholders, the directions in the two questions 'does VET do things the right way' and 'does VET do the right things' will overlap; their (subsidiary) interest is that VET does both the right things (for them) and that it does them the right way.

This has an impact on the internal dialogue: directors, but certainly teams as well, must be able to switch between ensuring that the education process runs smoothly and considering whether all subsidiary interests should be taken into account, and whether choices and achievements can be translated into programmatic adjustments, or can be accounted for.

The implication for the organisation of quality assurance for a VET institution is that quality is related to the execution of work processes and to recognition of the returns for and by stakeholders: students, the business community, the government and regional partners. In short: quality and quality assurance deserve to be considered from various perspectives.

The organisation of quality assurance: close to the primary process

The institution's own policy choices are positioned between involvement in developments in the environment of the college and organising the educational programmes on offer. This requires more than, in the words of the Administrative Agreement, 'adapting to the changing work and living environment'. Acquiring recognition requires legitimising choices rather than ensuring that specific wishes are carried out to the letter.

With the regard to the ambition level that is to be achieved, the institution itself determines how high the bar is set, in the context of regional developments. What is the institution accountable for? It is obvious that the execution of the work processes is crucial for the quality aspect of the answer. And that the organisation of these processes makes demands on people and the organisation. When it comes to the organisation of quality assurance, this is where the basis lies.

The thinking on and the organisation of quality assurance are not isolated from the developments described above. There is more to it than simply updating the parameters. The trend of working in teams is not unique to VET. This also applies to the thinking on quality and the structure of quality assurance. A change in function is occurring; from focusing on achieving the intended outcomes and reporting, to encouraging learning aimed at improving the quality of the work processes. The emphasis will shift towards a development approach, characterised by Klifman as a movement 'from system to process', which assumes a high degree of self-regulation.

In the traditional organisation model, specific responsibilities are vested in own staff departments. This is often accompanied by the autonomous growth of rules and records in order to keep a tighter rein on the behaviour of those carrying out the primary process. In line with Klifman's ideas, the business administrator Lekkerkerk found that it is more effective to endeavour to define responsibilities and self-regulation for these aspects of the primary process, in the light of the objectives pursued by the organisation. This will bring about a shift in the position of staff departments; particularly HRD and the department of education will assume the position of a service provider to the programme teams. They will assist and advise the teams in providing and redesigning (learning to redesign) teaching and learning processes. In short, in defining the new role of the institutions. Similarly, the position of the quality assurance department will also undergo a shift towards that of a service provider. For example, working with other departments to strengthen the management and problem-solving capability of teams. Data on critical process indicators will still continue to be collected and reported, but these data will be more meaningful internally if they are regarded as opportunities for improvement.

Not all implications are likely to be cushioned by the shifting direction of quality assurance. It cannot be ruled out that excessive demands will be made on the resilience of teams if the implications described land on their plate. But even if teams have up-to-date

labour market information, can swiftly translate this information on students into the curriculum, have design capability and responsibilities are clearly defined, it can be too much. It will also make demands on the rest of the organisation, perhaps in the form of additional services ('unburdening'), the presence of the directors ('the course') on the shop floor, or the stronger development of expertise in the teams or in the team composition itself..

2

Issues facing VET today

The playing field in which the VET institutions operate was described in the previous chapter. In this chapter we show how the institutions are currently operating in this playing field and what issues and challenges they are facing. The institutions are in various stages of development and are also partly facing different issues.

We have gauged the VET playing field by examining reports of the various activities of the Quality Network. What types of issues is the VET sector dealing with at present? This chapter begins with a brief description of the approach used and subsequently describes the results.

2.1 Approach

In order to distil relevant issues that emerged during the activities of the Quality Network, a content analysis was performed of the documents that were provided by the network. These documents provide an account of, or report on activities during the 2015-2018 period. A total of 135 documents were analysed based six types of activities.

- 1 Reports of *institutional audits* (32), in which a situation audit is carried out in the institution by relative outsiders. The audit consists of a document review, a visit to the institution and interviews with various representatives of the institution (including students, the board, teaching teams).
- 2 Reports of *themed audits* (12). Themed audits can be requested by the institutions to supplement the institutional audit and help obtain more insight into governance relating to certain themes. In the 2015-2018 period themed audits were organised on practical occupational training and examination.
- 3 Reports of *peer reviews* (3), in which a comparative analysis is performed of institutions based on a certain theme relating to the primary process of the study programme. The key objective is to share knowledge among the teaching teams of the various institutions.
- 4 Reports of *board discussion sessions, lecturer discussion sessions, student discussion sessions and learning networks* (22). During board discussion sessions, directors conduct an open discussion with each other on dilemmas, choices and experiences relating to strengthening the quality of education. The same dialogue is also conducted during lecturer and student discussion sessions, but from the perspective of the



#3 With each other

Students, teachers staff and management enter into discussions. They learn from and with each other in an environment in which they are encouraged to address each other and give feedback.

lecturer, the teaching team or the student. The learning network discusses a theme based on the combined perspectives of managers, lecturers, team leaders and students, for example.

- 5 Documents from *platform meetings* (22); meetings organised together with the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges (MBO Raad) aimed at sharing knowledge on a topical theme. The participants are policy officers who hold the quality assurance portfolio.
- 6 *Conference reports* (38). A conference with various speakers and workshops is organised each year. General reports on the day and other documentation such as presentations by workshop leaders were examined.
- 7 *Other documents* (7), such as strategic plans and interim reports on the activities of the Quality Network.

The documents were analysed by coding text fragments using a code chart in a software programme. First, the text fragments were coded according to two main themes: quality culture and organisational conditions. Second, all text fragments were classified by theme and issues were distilled from them. Third, the issues were summarised concisely and a search was performed for illustrative quotes and examples.

In addition to the document analysis, two interviews were organised with stakeholders from the various institutions. The results of the document analysis were discussed during these interviews and the themes were explained.

The results are classified according to two themes relevant to the Quality Network: quality culture and organisational conditions. The themes that emerged from the document analysis are subsequently described per core theme. The descriptions show which themes the institutions are faced with in practice and what the main concerns and issues are.

2.2 Quality culture

What is a quality culture? A possible description is provided in the report *'Kwaliteitscultuur versterken in onderwijsteams in het mbo: hoe doe je dat?'* ('Strengthening quality culture in VET teaching teams: a practical guide') (2017):

Quality culture refers to a particular mindset regarding quality and efforts to improve quality. It describes the accepted, unified and mostly tacit way in which a group (a team of teachers, a department or a school) strives to deliver quality in its teaching, as based on a set of underlying collective values and shared interpretations and conceptualisations. A quality culture is expressed in a group's language, standards and customary behaviours. In organisations and teaching teams there may in many cases be both an overarching culture and multiple subcultures.

The documents showed that the various activities of the network were themed around five aspects of quality culture in the last few years.

Ownership

When talking about quality culture, the importance of shared ownership is often highlighted, such as during a board discussion session: *"Quality culture cannot be strengthened without taking ownership. Professionalisation is a condition for ownership, but, equally, ownership is a condition for professionalisation."* It was also pointed out at Quality Network conferences that everyone in the institution is responsible for the quality of education and that people must take ownership.

Opinions differ on how shared ownership can be achieved in institutions. The extent to which everyone has a sense of ownership within institutions also differs, as illustrated by the audit reports: *"with regard to the discussion between team leaders and team members, in the random sample there still is a difference, particularly the involvement of lecturers in drawing up and discussing the team annual plan."* Another report states: *"a quality culture incorporating a structural form of reflection is not yet present everywhere and to the same extent. Attention should be paid to keeping 'quality awareness' and ownership (both at individual and team level) explicitly on the agenda, and to continuously encouraging teams to increase their job competence."*

Making teams responsible for drawing up their team plan will contribute significantly to developing shared ownership. This is being developed, according to the audit reports: *“the team plan used to be designed around the standards of the inspectorate. The teams now have more input and they determine most of the content of the team plan. Ambitions relating to the team’s performance are also included in the team plan.”*

Giving meaning during dialogue

During one of the board discussion sessions, the need was expressed to focus more attention on the content, the essence, of education. If the organisation focuses only on accountability, the system, the ‘for what question’ will be ignored: *“What is our purpose, and can we create room to achieve this?”* While the directors have noted that these discussions randomly take place in the teams, they have concluded that this discussion should be conducted more by the whole organisation.

It was also recommended on various occasions during institutional audits, or the wish was expressed, to conduct the substantive discussion institution-wide so that meaning can be given to the standards. The committee advised as follows in one of the audit reports: *“the discussion within the organisation should focus more on the substantiation of terms such as ‘interdisciplinary’ and a ‘proper counselling process’.”* But not only that; it was found in an institutional audit that even though teams engage in dialogue on the substance, they do not discuss quality assurance often enough: *“reporting also assumes that people know the meaning and importance of the standards and are creatively challenged to define them.”*

Data appreciation

A quality officer stated in a group interview: *“I wish my colleagues more data appreciation”.* She meant that teams can find data and data collection a burden even though data can be really useful for improving education. Institutional audit reports regularly highlight the burden of bureaucracy. Staff find that a lot of attention is paid to figures and box ticking, which they feel is not always useful and disregards the objective of their educational programmes. It is a challenge for institutions to find an effective way of not only using data for reporting purposes, but also for the specific purpose of learning from the information and improving education. The following recommendation was made in one of the audit reports: *“to promote a more inspiring quality culture, the more instrument-based approach could perhaps be downscaled. However, this implies that the organisation should continue to closely monitor the extent to which the quality insurance system and the instruments used contribute to achieving the organisation’s ambitions.”*

A more supporting role for staff is being examined, with more emphasis on the function of sparring partner for teams. Well-intended initiatives to provide even more instruments or guidelines are not always appreciated by teams: *“avoid dumping things with teams and change your mindset to ‘how can I help?’”,* was a recommendation made at a conference.

Frameworks and freedom

How do you focus on more room for teaching teams? The movement is successful only if the room for ownership is desired, felt and taken by teams. Strict top-down reasoning is not really appropriate here, but the question simultaneously arises whether the bottom-up approach gets changes off the ground. In addition, more room implies more variation and 'customisation'. How much room is offered for variation, is a related management question. The level of professionalism and the job competence of the teaching teams is a factor that comes into play in management choices. This issue was raised during one of the board discussion sessions. Striking a balance between frameworks and freedom is another recurring topic in the audit reports.

It was pointed out several times in the institutional reports that an informal, implicit improvement culture could clash with external expectations on formal accountability: "the expeditiousness referred to earlier with which changes in the organisation are dealt with and implemented is not yet visible in the available plans and documents."

Moreover, institutions sometimes need to strike a balance between offering teams freedom and preventing that freedom from leading to the inability to respond: *"lecturers have stated that they would like to work in accordance with clear frameworks indicating what is possible/not possible, what should be delivered etc. They have explicitly pointed out that the frameworks should offer sufficient room for their own input/their own freedom of movement as professionals."*



#4 Facilitate

Administration, staf services and managent support the teachers on demand and where possible. They create the right conditions to ensure the quality of higher education.

One of the institutions is intentionally focusing less on systematic quality control: *“meaningful quality activities and quality awareness can never be achieved using a system that is primarily based on control. The institution does wish to interfere with the movement initiated to improve the quality culture focusing on the soft controls in particular, by largely working in terms of systems.”*

Learning from each other and giving feedback

Learning from each other and giving feedback are often said to be essential for a quality culture. Essentially, this is the freedom, if it exists, to provide each other with feedback. Is there a culture in which others are called to account? Trust in, and safety and responsibility for all employees make it easier to discuss matters and to provide feedback both in one’s own team and throughout the various layers of the organisation. This will strengthen ownership by individuals and teams.

Although this is receiving more attention, lecturers do not always feel that they have the freedom and confidence to call colleagues to account, and to provide and ask for feedback. One of the institutional reports states the following: *“the mutual dialogue seems restrained by caution or by restraint in interacting with one another.” There could also be a gap between management and the shop floor: “the improvement policy could be more effective if feedback from lecturers on the organisation were better received and addressed.”*

In addition to feedback the potential for ‘horizontal learning’ is regularly stated. *“currently, the experience gained mostly stays within the individual teams. Learning from each other and sharing knowledge should be facilitated more.”* Institutions are wondering how they can encourage lecturers/lecturer teams to learn from each other. Lecturers could, for instance, observe lessons given by immediate colleagues or discuss the curriculum with a colleague and ask each other critical questions.

2.3 Organisational conditions

The organisational conditions needed for good quality assurance also featured prominently on the agenda during the various activities of the Quality Network. The view is widely shared that it is important to involve the right stakeholders in policy in order to not only ensure basic quality, but also to work on one’s own ambitions and to translate these properly to team level. Working with data on educational quality for risk management purposes, for instance, was discussed as well as the importance of a cyclical approach. Lastly, many institutions have assigned teams more responsibility for educational quality, which has consequences for the organisation of the support services. It requires a considerable effort to optimise the organisational conditions; these issues were frequently raised for discussion.

Translation of the educational vision, strategy or ambitions

If the central vision, strategy and ambitions on educational quality are clear, they must be implemented by the teams. This takes place by translating ambitions to team level and organising consultations. The institutional audits show that implementation proceeds with varying degrees of success. Some teams have done this properly, there is a clear link between team plans and the central strategy and implementation of the ambitions by the teams is monitored. *“teams (both teaching teams and department teams) work with a team annual plan, which includes team objectives derived from the current strategic themes of institution X”.*

At most institutions the translation of strategic ambitions into team ambitions is not yet proceeding smoothly. There are various reasons. Teams cannot sufficiently identify with the vision; there is a lack of support, or the vision and the corresponding indicators have not yet been specifically defined so that teams can work with them: *“views on what education at institution X means exactly, still differ within the organisation”.* In other cases, the indicators are clear but the standards are not. It is not clear to the team what exactly is expected from them. The consequence is that both team plans and the educational innovations of teams are not always linked to the organisation’s strategy or vision: *“this does not mean to say that nothing is happening. The promising initiatives were already stated; they are mainly in line with the strategic ambition to strengthen the collaboration with and alignment with the occupational field in the region. However, the teams interviewed are not clear on how they can link these projects to the other ambitions in the strategic plan.”* Strengthening the link between the central vision and ambition and the activities and choices of teams was also discussed at general meetings.

Improvement ambitions

The balance between the basic quality being in order and working on the organisation’s ambitions was discussed during the institutional audits. The basis is in order at most institutions; they comply with the inspectorate’s requirements. However, the efforts devoted to own ambitions differ. Some institutions have defined the educational vision and translated it into indicators so that teams can work with it. *“The policy pursued by institution X is an adequate translation of the vision for education, particularly in view of the interconnectedness between education and the occupational field that exists in various study programmes.”* Other institutions have no explicit vision or have only taken the first steps towards developing a vision: *“institution X has no explicit ‘Vision for education’ or an education framework within which the departments organise education.”*

Even if institutions have their own vision for educational quality, the question then is whether focus is actually placed on the vision and whether implementation is monitored. During the audit, some institutions were advised to focus more on this: *“efforts focus on safeguarding and optimising the basic quality; the audit committee questions whether sufficient attention is paid to the change ambitions and whether this is made sufficiently challeng-*

ing in the line organisation (is the bar high enough? Have the objectives been formulated in a results-oriented manner?)". In some cases, more attention should be paid to monitoring innovations: "with regard to monitoring the development of education at institution X, the audit committee has found that progress on innovation still is hardly monitored."

Now that the basis is generally in order, the challenge facing the institutions is to activate the innovation and development capability across all layers of the organisation, while maintaining the basic quality. Participants at network conferences also regard engaging in dialogue with the internal and external stakeholders as an important means of initiating and continuing the process of further development and innovation. During a conference, a different approach to inspectorate visits was also discussed, which includes monitoring the achievement of the college's own ambitions.

Managing educational quality

The degree of top-down or bottom-up responsibility was discussed during the institutional audits. In some institutions the vision, policy and education are managed at central level. In that case, programme managers are mainly responsible for operational matters and for implementing policy, but have less responsibility for developing policy. However, more and more institutions are transitioning to decentralised management: more responsibility for the quality of education, the education process or the allocation of tasks within teams. Education can therefore be tailored better to the needs of students, the occupational field and the region. This transition poses a number of challenges.

It is important to give teams the room to formulate, implement and monitor their own ambitions. But is this possible without losing sight of the institution's vision? *"Institution X focuses strongly on uniqueness and core values. This creates tension between the pursuit of uniqueness in policy frameworks and the envisaged flexibility in the curriculum and the creative community."* The programme manager's role is considered crucial in transitioning to more team responsibility. The programme manager must ensure that directors and teams connect and communicate. This was also discussed during the board discussion sessions. Many institutions are seeking a balance between giving teams room and being in control. *"trusting in teams (team ownership) does not provide any hard control indicators. How can we, the board, be certain whether education of good quality will be provided?"* Similar to the inspectorate, the institutions apply the principle of proportional supervision: teams will be offered more room if the quality is up to standard.

A topic discussed at the board discussion sessions was adapting the responsibility allocated to teams to their 'maturity level': *"the movement is successful only if the room for ownership is desired, felt and taken by teams."* In this context, a toolkit that makes lecturers more aware of their own role in achieving educational quality was discussed at general meetings. The tension between giving teams ownership and systems thinking

was discussed at the board discussion sessions, by the learning networks and at general meetings: *“with its formats, frameworks and procedures the teaching organisation seems to be more system-oriented than focused on students in their current and future experiential world. The movement towards more ownership for teams can bring education closer to the experiential world.”* Some institutions have opted for the middle road: giving teams more responsibility for teaching while adhering to strict procedures and the centralised administration of examinations because the systems world does not allow any other choice. When implementing practical occupational training, the systems world often seems to be obstructive: *“the question arises how the differences in the approaches to practical occupational training should be taken into account by a VET institution that is expected to prepare and achieve the institution-wide performance agreements on practical occupational training.”*

Assigning more responsibility to the teams also has implications for the support services. Staff departments can adopt a more team-oriented approach and support teams more, and will therefore literally be positioned closer to the teams: *“the regional education and training centres (ROCs) are in the initial stages of this development, in which the staff departments should be challenged and invited to think and act from the team perspective. They should not only take the team leader as the starting point or contact point, but also, and crucially, the team.”* In addition, the changing role of HR was discussed during board discussion sessions, learning network sessions and institutional audits. In recruitment and professionalisation activities, for instance, HR should give more consideration to the team’s vision, foster a professional culture and assume a role in coaching team leaders, because it is a crucial role.

Involving stakeholders

The institutional audit reports in particular state that stakeholders are involved in developing a vision, policy or study programmes. Internal stakeholders, such as students or staff are frequently involved: *“the strategy process is designed from the bottom-up and in dialogue with stakeholders. Various sessions have been held with a broad representation of employees.”* A satisfaction survey or a needs assessment survey is conducted among internal stakeholders. The institutions also work together with external stakeholders, such as the regional business community and the education sectors. They are involved in developing policy, the vision or strategy, finding solutions to issues and in developing study programmes: *“the social engagement of institution X is reflected in participation in regional collaborations with various bodies and initiatives, such as project X aimed at preventing domestic violence, ‘the school as the workshop’ and other ‘external to internal care’ initiatives aimed at reducing early school-leaving.”*

According to the institutional audits, the involvement of stakeholders could be intensified. The extent to which external and internal stakeholders, including students, are explicitly heard on a regular basis varies by institution. *“It also emerged from discussions*

with them that students are taken seriously. Examples are panels, surveys at the end of a period, easily approaching the programme manager or teachers.” Other institutions should pay more attention to implementation: *“the dialogue with external stakeholders does not yet take place on a regular basis, and there should also be more dialogue with students.”* Feedback is not always given on what was done with student input. In addition, in some cases, the role of lecturers in developing policy is limited because of a lack of time. Lastly, there are ‘forgotten groups’, such as alumni, who provide feedback on the quality of education.

In conclusion, the importance of involving the occupational field was highlighted on several occasions: *“all the directors stated that they want to strengthen the relationship with the regional business community and are looking for ways to do so in the changing landscape of the organised business community, which is increasingly made up of networks of businesses, start-ups and self-employed professionals.”* Contacts with the occupational field are regarded as an opportunity to improve quality. Directors are aware that they too have a role in making and staying in contact with the occupational field.

Cyclical approach

Colleges are usually found to have adopted a cyclical approach to quality assurance. Important cycles are the P&C cycle, management review cycles and the PDCA cycle. In some institutions the full cycles are completed: *“team plans, which are based on a through (SWOT) analysis, and reviews are regarded as being ‘from the teams’. Progress is frequently discussed, and actions are identified, assigned and results are monitored by the teams.”*

A frequent comment made was that the PDCA cycle is not always fully completed, or that not all stages are completed. In some cases, the ‘Check’ has not been performed: the effects of interventions are not monitored or are insufficiently related to team objectives or a vision: *“programme coordinators create a team annual plan but there is no professional dialogue on content and progress.”* In other cases, improvement actions (‘Act’) based on evaluations are not explicitly identified or not carried out: *“an important point that should be looked at is the extent to which the teams manage to convert the results of the measurements into improvement plans and actions, which clearly includes examining the effects of the measures.”*

Focus is often placed on doing (‘Do’ and ‘Act’) and to a lesser extent on thinking about the choice of measures (‘Plan’) or monitoring their effects (‘Check’). Interventions will be more effective by paying more attention to this: Closing the circle, completing processes, thinking things through at the front end, and making improvements after a thorough evaluation are frequently stated improvement areas.

Utilising improvement data

The institutional audits show that institutions collect data on the educational quality in various ways: from audits, satisfaction surveys and self-evaluations. Institutions focus



#5 With knowledge

Teachers and management use data analysis and research to improve the quality of education.

mainly on audits; the methodology has improved, auditors are trained and audits at some institutions are performed by external agencies. Data are gathered from multiple groups: students, employees and the business community. Data are also processed in different ways: in management reviews, quality profiles or in an individual team dashboard. Some institutions work with internal benchmarks to compare teams with each other.

The institutional audits provide a number of recommendations on making available and using data on educational quality. Data should be presented more coherently and be made more meaningful by, for example, linking data to ambitions: *“data are presented in isolation, without putting them into a context or a time frame, or using a benchmark. This makes it difficult to monitor critical performance indicators. Data analyses can be improved by making more comprehensive analyses and making connections between the available data; ask research questions relating to the data that will provide more insight into target results that have not been achieved, or can provide information on making interventions.”* More use can also be made of qualitative information to provide a more complete picture of the educational quality of study programmes.

Data can be used not only for reporting purposes but also as the basis for discussing follow-up actions: *“information used for reporting purposes is not always management information that provides feedback on the extent to which the objectives have been achieved. Rather than a review, preferably an outlook.”* This was also discussed at conferences: *“making the transition from ‘judging by performance’ to documenting in a meaningful manner.”* An observation made during a general meeting ties in with this; there is a need for more

data at study programme level so that teams can examine the impact of interventions or innovations in the classroom.

Risk management

The implementation and use of risk management was discussed during institutional audits. Institutions collect data in various ways in order to identify risks, such from audits, self-evaluations or using data (school drop-out rate, study success rate and satisfaction rate). This information is used for example in risk profiles and quarterly reports.

The manner in which this information is used for risk management purposes differs by individual institution and even by individual study programme. Some institutions have made more progress in this area than others.

For instance, risk management information is not always available to the Executive Board or the team even though they need it: *“the Executive Board has quantitative management information at institution level, i.e. management level. The information at study programme level is marginal.”* While the Executive Board at most institutions is aware of weak study programmes, the information is not always recorded in documents.

“The audit committee concludes that although this is not evident from the documents, the risks of the organisation have definitively been identified. These risks are also factored into the improvement plans.”

The extent to which the results of risk analyses are used for improvement actions varies. In some cases risk analyses are regularly discussed: *“Risks are monitored annually. This includes comparing the annual results of study programmes to the national standard (of the inspectorate). If the results give cause to do so, the factors underlying the result are examined and explained, and specific improvement measures are suggested.”* In other institutions risks are not discussed on such a regular basis within the various layers of the institution. *“there is no regular communication on weak and strong study programmes between the institutional management, directors and team leaders concerned and any improvement actions.”*

The extent to which the results of risk analyses are used for the quality policy also varies. A recommendation made by the audit committee of an institution was *“to work more on the connection between risk management and quality management for education. The risk management system is currently based on the KPMG approach and is primarily defined in the context of financial risks.”* On the other hand, another audit report states that ‘the Executive Board has sufficient management information to assess the educational quality of study programmes. *“A risk analysis is performed at institutional level that serves as a guideline for the quality policy.”*

2.4 Conclusions

The developments in VET and what this means for VET institutions were described in Chapter 1. It has become clear in this chapter that the VET sector itself is in a state of flux when it comes to safeguarding quality. Various issues relating to quality culture and conditions were identified and actions are taken in response. Not all developments stated in Chapter 1 are reflected in the issues the institutions are currently dealing with. In Chapter 3 we look will look further into the future. What are the quality themes VET institutions should focus on in the years ahead? What does this mean for the Quality Network?

3

Building blocks for the future

A picture of the status of quality development assurance at VET institutions, based on the network's activities, was presented in the previous chapter. Preceding that in Part 1, the most important trends and developments in and around VET and their potential impact on quality development were described. The question in the final part of this memorandum is what all this might mean for the positioning and the objective of the Quality Network. Can the network be abolished because it has accomplished its task, or does it still have an important role in the future? The answer to these questions can offer input for considering the network's future.

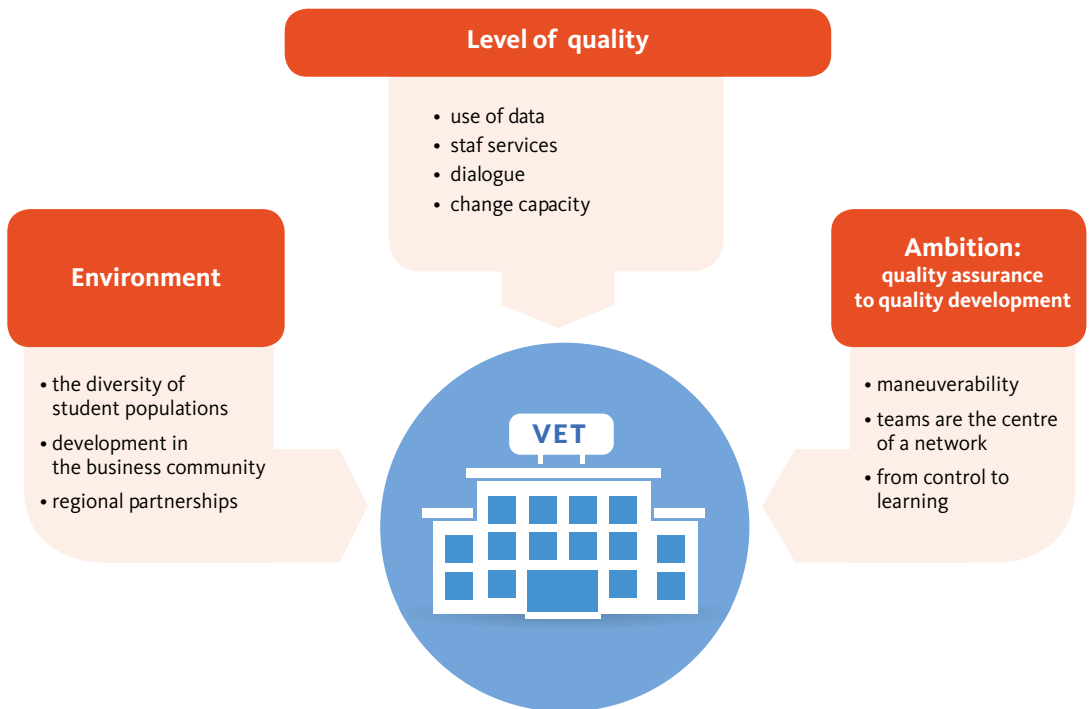
The VET institutions will be briefly discussed first and then the network.

3.1 Movements from *Ist* to *Soll* in the institutions

The second part of this memorandum highlights the wide range of issues relating to quality culture, the organisation of quality assurance and the day-to-day issues. The contexts and initial situations are both quite different. Various stages of development are evident. It is essential for institutions to understand where they stand, what the current situation is.

And what then is the desired situation, the *Soll* situation for quality and quality assurance? Based on the trends and developments (Part 1), it became clear that there is no clear-cut perspective for the future. It is better and more interesting to talk about movements, about from and to. In the spectrum of movements an organisation can diagnose its current situation and indicate which steps it will and can take towards a future-oriented quality development. This image shows the tension field described in Parts 1 and 2:

This image focuses on the quality development of the institution. This must be linked to developments and trends in the institution's environment, such as the rapid developments in the business community. Colleges do this in various ways, for example using data. If the institution wants to be future-proof in terms of quality development, it will also have to be agile.



In general, the following movements from 1st to Soll can be identified:

From quality assurance to quality development

You could also say from curative to preventive, or from reactive to proactive. The comparison with the organisation of financial processes of an institution, for instance, speaks volumes. Institutions generally closely follow the cycle of long-term budgeting, interim progress reports, adjustments and financial statements. These cycles are becoming more policy-oriented. The bare design approach no longer suffices, also with regard to quality assurance. This will be replaced by a development approach.

From systems to processes and people

In other words, from more static and remote (checklists) to being closer to the dynamics of processes and people. Traditional systems thinking is no longer capable of adequately responding to the multiplicity of external and internal developments. A form of quality development is required that is ingrained in all core processes and people at the institution.

From isolation to integration

In the first case, quality assurance is a task that belongs to a small group of actors, usually in top management and in the staff departments. The position of quality assurance in this case emanates mainly from the secondary processes, in which people in the primary process are 'unburdened'. The future requires that quality be woven into the fabric of the entire organisation, into all policy process, from operations to strategy.

From control to learning

The goal of quality assurance is undergoing a fundamental shift. In the first case (control), all efforts are aimed at eliminating risks and avoiding a poor show, for instance, for the inspectorate. In the second case, Demming's quality circle, involving plan, do, check and act, is fully operational. Here, evaluation is one of the components of the continuous learning process. Clearly, the ultimate goal of any institution is to achieve a higher level of quality.

From individual to collective ownership

In the 'old situation' ownership is vested mainly in the top management of the organisation and quality assurance is managed top-down. In the future, ownership at all levels is essential. It will focus on the organisation's *raison d'être*, which is the primary process itself, the teams who can make it happen, with support from the whole organisation. In other words: from centralised to decentralised, 'guided by the motto 'teams in the lead'.

To networking (learning)

It is clear and essential that organisations should develop not only internal but also external responsiveness. The distinction between internal and external will blur. There will be more networking and network learning. Developments such as agility and flexibilisation can be put into this context, which will primarily take the form of teams.

Fixed course and future-oriented

All of the above movements will be driven by the goal, the course, the dot on the horizon of each respective institution. It was stated earlier that the initial situation differs. The institution's own course provides a framework for quality assurance, or more appropriately quality development. The institution's course can also help to engage professionally with the large number of stakeholders.

Consciously competent or incompetent

In order to progress from 1st to Soll, a number of essential conditions must be met. The key factors in terms of capabilities are as follows:

Thinking capability

Thinking capability is required, for instance, to convert data into usable information that can provide guidance on systematically thinking through the interventions to be made.

A research-based attitude also is important here. The ultimate goal is to strike the right balance between thinking and doing.

Innovation capability

The ability to translate external and internal challenges into concrete innovations.

Change capability

The competencies to organise and complete all stages of the change process in an effective manner.

Execution capability

In the end, the brainwork must be converted into appropriate actions. Execution capability is the organisation's ability to convert ideas into deeds. Thinking and DOING.

It is essential that the organisation is aware of where it really stands (1st), where it wants to go (Soll) and to what extent it is equipped to make further progress with quality development. The trick is to strike the right balance between desirability and feasibility. The capabilities described earlier, or core competencies, should therefore be further developed. They are the success factors. Particular attention should be paid to the maturity of teams. They will have lot on their plate. This merits a diligent support structure and an appropriate change process.

3.2 What does this mean for the future of the Quality network?

The network has developed expeditiously from the outset. Its role has become more and more facilitative and it has adopted a broader and deeper approach. The network has always been guided by the ultimate goal of advancing quality development in the institutions, and hence in the sector. In order to achieve that goal, the network has focused more and more on learning and development by, and within the institutions.

The question now is what the next steps or stages in its own growth and development are. The above major movements offer an excellent reference framework for its future.

Aim of the network:

In essence the objective, the meaning of the network is to help the institutions progress in the area of quality development. To that end, the network makes every effort to encourage and facilitate learning and development across the entire organisation. Ownership obviously remains vested in the institutions. It is conceivable that alongside, or instead of, the current activities other working methods will be used. The name Quality Network remains appropriate. According to the network philosophy, responsiveness and agility are characteristics of this form of organisation. In addition, more attention should be paid to the objective of knowledge development and placing quality development

topics on the agenda. The latter also has a particularly important function for the entire VET sector.

Positioning of the network: autonomous and independent

The future positioning of the network is key to the achievement of these objectives. To that end, autonomous and independent are essential conditions, particularly in a playing field largely populated by the institutions, the ministry, the inspectorate, the Netherlands Association of VET Colleges, the Foundation for Cooperation between Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB) and the business community. It is vitally important not to step into the world of judgement, but into that of recognition and learning. In order to assume this autonomous and independent position, a good partnership with stakeholders is required. In this context, again it is essential to maintain the balance between closeness and distance.

A tailor-made approach to recognition and facilitation in a more complex context

The heart of the network's 'methodology consists of promoting learning and development in various ways. The above movements show that the context of quality development is becoming more complex and dynamic. And that more and more tailor-made programmes will need to be delivered in the tension field between the different initial situations and targets. The concepts of facilitation and recognition constitute the core activities and working methods of the network in the future.

Agenda and knowledge development: additional boost needed

The wealth of experience and knowledge available within and acquired through the network provide more and more scope to engage in research and knowledge development. This will also create a solid basis for placing quality development themes on the agenda. However, this is subject to the condition that extra attention is given to both research development and to placing quality development on the agenda.

The institutions and the sector: earned trust

The network has achieved an authoritative position which also has consequences for the status of quality development in the sector. Progress has not only been made on the theme within the institutions but also at sector level. More trust has been earned as result. This trend also merits attention in the years ahead.

Further development

Further development is just as important for the network as it is for the institutions and the sector. The external developments facing the institutions and the sector also pose challenges to the network in the future. The tightening and broadening of the network's objectives also affect the answers to questions such as:

- What will our strategic course be for the future?
- How will our organisation adapt its structure to that?
- How will our relationship with the institutions develop? We will also view and approach the network of colleges differently, for example?
- What competencies does the network itself need? What is our learning and development process?

Guiding perspective

All in all, the Quality Network has an important role to fulfil in the future. In other words: there is a guiding perspective for the network. However, this is contingent upon the network's continued expeditious development. The above challenges provide a guiding and hopefully inspiring perspective.

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Colophon

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Coördination on behalf of MBO Quality Network: Merel Hendriks and Kasper Weekenborg

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