

Netherlands

International case study

Generic skills description	Academic curriculum: 21st Century skills Vocational curriculum: Key competencies
Generic skills in the academic and vocational curriculum	Skills and key competencies are related but are distinct. Integrated and embedded in academic and vocational subjects.
Skills teaching and learning approaches	Emphasis on practical and participative approaches.
Generic skills assessment	Not assessed, but some of the key competencies are a part of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) curriculum.
Teacher autonomy	Autonomy to embed and adapt curriculum and significant pedagogical freedom.

This is a case study of generic skills in 14-19 education in **Netherlands** developed through a desk review of selected, mostly official documents. It is intended to be read alongside another 9 international case studies and an overarching summary report of the research *Sheffield Institute of Education* undertook in collaboration with *Centre for Education Systems* with funding from *The Charitable Foundation for Educational Development*. The project investigated how ‘generic skills’ are characterised, understood, and implemented across 10 jurisdictions, with particular reference to the relevance for England.

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Summary

In the Netherlands, generic skills appear differently in the academic and vocational curricula.

21st Century skills	Vocational Education and Training key competences
creativity	communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages
critical thinking	digital competence
problem-solving	learning to learn
communication	interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies
collaboration	entrepreneurship
digital literacy (including ICT skills, information literacy, and media literacy)	cultural expression
social and cultural skills	
self-regulation	

In the school curriculum, the current curriculum offers limited guidance for integrating these skills into teaching practice, reflecting a general principal of Dutch education of school and teacher autonomy.

In VET schools, competences in Dutch and English communication are included in school exams. The interpersonal, intercultural, social, and civic competencies are assessed by the examinations committee at the end of a course.

1. Contextual factors

This section provides an overview of the country of the Netherlands, beginning with its social and economic context and its educational context in Section 1.1. In Section 1.2 the key systems and structures of the education system are explored. Section 1.3 covers the education workforce and professional status. Finally, Section 1.4 describes how policy relating to skills is formed and enacted in the Netherlands. These are all discussed with particular relation to generic skills.

1.1 Economic, social, and educational context

The Netherlands has historically demonstrated stability in its political, economic, and social spheres, and is known for its robust educational system. One of the fundamental principles underlying the Dutch educational system is the concept of equal opportunities. Financial support programs are in place to facilitate educational opportunities for all¹. The country's education policies aim to ensure that individuals, regardless of their social or ethnic backgrounds, have access to quality education and the freedom to choose their educational pathways, leading to well-developed vocational education (VET).

The Netherlands is a diverse nation with a significant number of ethnic communities. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of individuals in the Netherlands who were either first or second-generation immigrants rose from 3.4 million to 4 million. By 2019, this accounted for approximately 23% of the overall population.²As cultural diversity has grown, school classes have become increasingly multicultural, encompassing a wide range of ethnic groups and religions. Even within certain ethnic groups, there is significant variation among students in the second and third generations³.

Secondary vocational education (MBO) is the largest educational pathway in the Netherlands, with over 500,000 students enrolled. It plays a crucial role and maintains a close connection with the labour market, with integration between classroom learning and practical experiences being common. It's common for immigrant students to enrol in this form of education, and in certain major cities, they make up to 80% of the student population in MBO.⁴

1 European Commission, 2022 <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/netherlands/66-social-inclusion-through-education-and-training>

2 CBS Open data StatLine., 2022 [https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/portal.html? la=nl& _catalog=CBS&tableId=37296ned& _theme=60](https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/portal.html?la=nl&_catalog=CBS&tableId=37296ned&_theme=60)

3 Crul, Uslu, & Lelie, 2016

4 Tielman, Wesselink, & den Brok, 2021

1.2 Key educational systems and structures

Curricula, assessment, and qualifications

The curricula in the Netherlands emphasise the development of both subject-specific knowledge and generic skills. Generic skills, often referred to as 21st-century skills and key competences, are incorporated into various subject areas and are considered essential for students' overall education and are an important part of recent curriculum reforms⁵.

Assessment methods in the Netherlands focus on evaluating students' achievement of both subject-specific content and the development of some key competences. Assessment practices vary depending on the level of education, aiming to provide a comprehensive picture of students' knowledge, skills, and competencies. At the end of secondary education, students take central examinations called the Centrale Examens. These exams take place under the responsibility of the Board of Tests and Examinations (CvTE) and assess students' knowledge and skills in core subjects. The results of these exams are an essential factor in determining a student's eligibility for further education.⁶

The Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF) provides a structured framework for categorising and describing the various qualification levels in the Netherlands. Qualifications are classified and assigned specific NLQF levels to indicate their corresponding level of attainment.

The Netherlands has a strong VET system. VET qualifications focus on preparing students for specific professions and include a combination of theoretical knowledge, practical training, and work-based learning. The MBO spans a duration of up to four years and offers a diverse range of career pathways.

School/college organisation

Upon completing primary school, students progress to one of three categories of secondary education: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), senior general secondary education (HAVO), or pre-university education (VWO). Secondary education aims to equip students for further studies in MBO, HBO, or university education.⁷ The education system shows in Figure 1, overleaf.

Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) is market driven, with numerous providers offering a variety of vocational and more general courses. CVET caters to jobseekers, the unemployed, employees, self-employed individuals, and employers. There are three types of CVET available:⁸

- upper secondary IVET programmes which also function as CVET
- training for unemployed and jobseekers, financed by the public employment service
- private, non-government-funded training for employees, self-employed people, and employers.

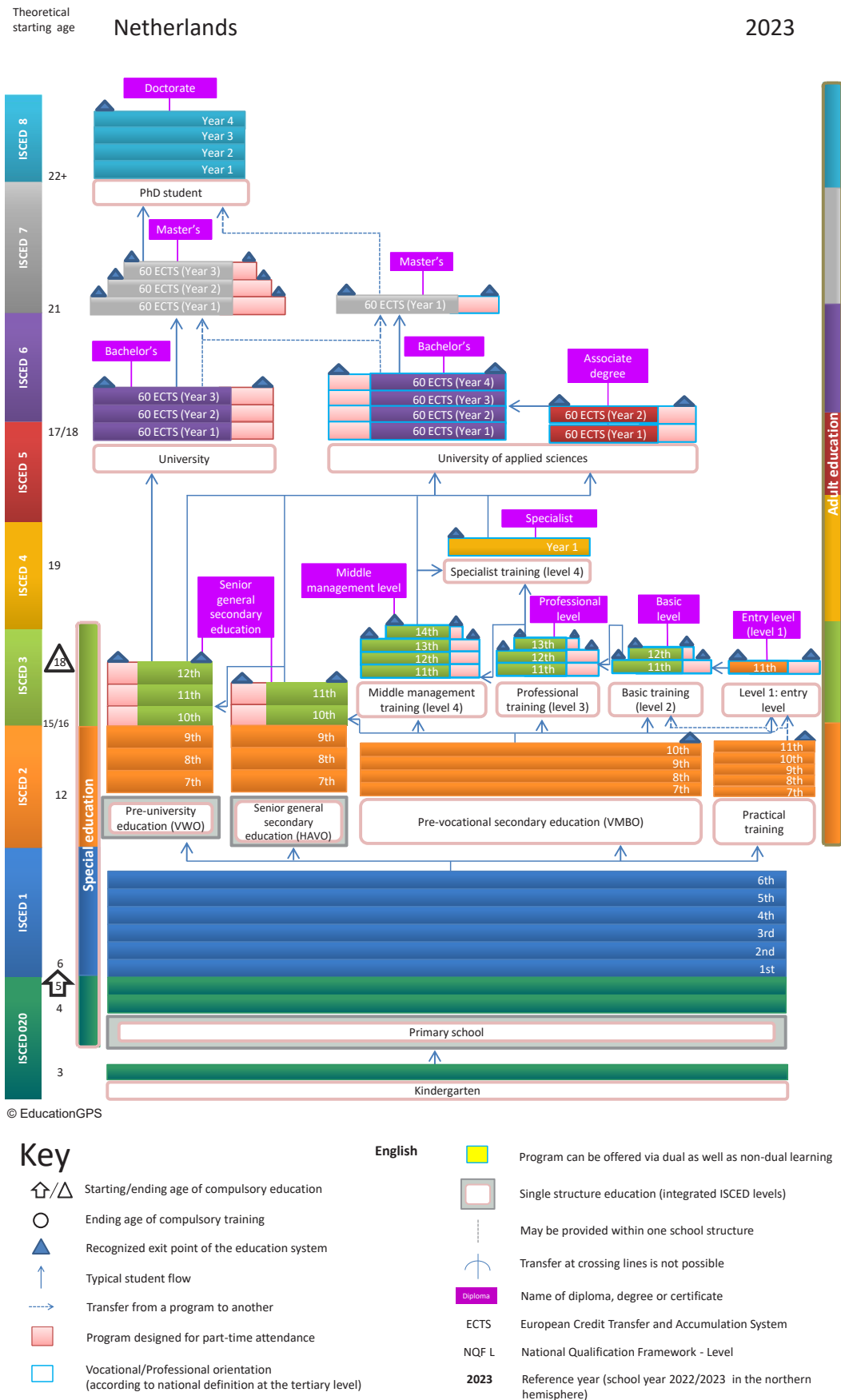
5 OECD 2019 https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/contact/E2030_CCM_analysis_NLD_curriculum_proposal.pdf

6 Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-a <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/eindexamens>

7 Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-b <https://www.government.nl/topics/secondary-education>

8 CEDEFOP, 2019 <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/netherlands-2019>

Figure 1. Education system in the Netherlands.⁹



1.3 Education workforce and professional status

The Education Professions Act establishes the standards for competence that teachers and other educational staff in primary, general secondary, vocational secondary, and general adult education must meet. As per this act, schools are obligated to maintain a competence document for each teacher, outlining their required qualifications and skills. In upper secondary vocational education, teachers are required to hold one of the following qualifications.¹⁰

- a Master degree teaching license
- a Bachelor degree teaching license
- a teaching certificate (a higher education diploma is obligatory to obtain a teaching certificate)

Newly implemented regulations now mandate specific qualifications for instructors, who are responsible for imparting vocational skills training to learners. These requirements necessitate that instructors meet professional standards, as well as possess proficiency in didactic and pedagogical practices.¹¹

Trainers who oversee the in-company learning of upper secondary VET students, whether in apprenticeship or school-based tracks, must possess qualifications that are at least equivalent to the level at which they supervise work-based learning. Additionally, trainers are expected to effectively communicate their expertise to students and hold pedagogical skills, which are verified through diplomas or certificates. The quality of trainers is a crucial factor in the accreditation process for companies offering work-based learning. The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training, and the Labour Market (SBB) is responsible for accrediting such companies as one of its legal obligations. Private providers offer training programs specifically designed for trainers.¹²

The concept of “competence-based education” was originally discussed in the Netherlands in the 1990s and implemented from the mid-2000s. This approach emphasises that curricula in vocational education should be designed based on an analysis of the actual roles and responsibilities of professionals in society. To achieve this, there is an emphasis on vocational teachers from various disciplines collaborating and participating in team learning activities.¹³

Professional status and autonomy

The Dutch education system emphasises educational freedom including in pedagogy¹⁴. Teachers have the freedom to decide how to deliver the curriculum, choosing from a wide array of teaching methodologies, strategies, and approaches. This flexibility enables them to adapt their teaching to their students’ specific needs (e.g. learning styles).¹⁵ While there are national frameworks and

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ van Griethuijsen, Kunst, van Woerkom, Wesselink, & Poell, 2020

¹⁴ Eurydice at the European Commission, 2024 Netherlands ongoing reforms and policy developments <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/netherlands/ongoing-reforms-and-policy-developments>

¹⁵ Inspectorate of Education at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, n.d. <https://english.onderwijsinspectie.nl>

guidelines that outline the expected learning objectives and content, teachers have the flexibility to make their own decisions about how they deliver the curriculum and select teaching materials.

Vocational schools also have the freedom to define their own strategy and priorities through collaborative discussions with regional partners. The establishment of partnerships with the labour market is highly encouraged and valued. The emphasis remains on enhancing the quality of initial VET while simultaneously increasing the flexibility of continuous VET programs.¹⁶

1.4 Policy formation and implementation

The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) is responsible for VET policy and oversight, except for the agriculture sector, which has its own department under the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture, and Innovation (EL&I). The EL&I funds the Agricultural Education and Training Centres (AOCs) and leads on industrial policy. Assisting the government in VET policy is the Foundation for Cooperation on VET and the Labour Market (SBB), which represents employers, employees, and training providers. The SBB provides unified recommendations and advice to the OCW and has a strategic board composed of members from these social partners, including the chair of the Association for Vocational and Adult Education, an umbrella body for state-funded training providers. The SBB acts as a single point of contact for education and labour matters.¹⁷

Two different approaches to skills anticipation can be identified: top-down and bottom-up. The top-down approach involves the use of a comprehensive forecasting model that encompasses the entire labour market. National data sources are utilised to generate information that is relevant for policy makers and provides guidance. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach involves the utilisation of partial labour market forecast models. These models may focus on a specific sector, occupation, or a selected group of them. In this approach, specific and sometimes ad hoc data sources are utilised. The bottom-up approach can complement the top-down approach, providing more detailed insights into specific areas of the labour market.¹⁸

[nl/inspection/the-dutch-educational-system](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/netherlands-2020)

¹⁶ CEDEFOP, 2020 <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool/countries/netherlands-2020>

¹⁷ Casey for UKCES, 2013 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303481/briefing-paper-vocational-education-system-netherlands.pdf

¹⁸ CEDEFOP, 2019

2. Generic skills

In the Netherlands, generic skills, known as 21st-century skills, are intended for all students particularly in primary and secondary education. These skills include:

- creativity
- critical thinking
- problem-solving skills
- communication
- collaboration
- digital literacy (a combination of ICT basic skills, information literacy and media literacy)
- social and cultural skills
- self-regulation.

Although these skills seem essential for success in various aspects of life, there is not much evidence can be found the emphasis of 21st-century skills in Dutch education. Fisser and Thijs (2015) studied the integration of 21st century skill into the Dutch curriculum found that although the intended curriculum provides a starting point for integrating 21st century skills, it lacks explicit and systematic focus, with communication being the most common skill across core objectives, reference levels, and learning materials, while collaboration is most prevalent in learning materials. Social and cultural skills are specified in less detail in learning materials, and creativity, problem-solving skills, and digital literacy receive the least attention.¹⁹ There is currently a lack of assessment and evaluation policies specifically addressing these skills.²⁰

Dutch VET also encompasses the development of generic skills, known as key competences which includes:²¹

- communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages
- digital competence
- learning to learn
- interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies
- entrepreneurship
- cultural expression

¹⁹ Fisser & Thijs, 2015

²⁰ Ananiadou & Claro for OECD, 2009 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/21st-century-skills-and-competences-for-new-millennium-learners-in-oecd-countries_218525261154

²¹ Westerhuis for CEDEFOP, 2016 https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2016/ReferNet_NL_KC.pdf

Some of these competences are part of the VET curriculum and are compulsory in certain VET programs. In VET schools, competences in Dutch and English communication are included in school exams. The interpersonal, intercultural, social, and civic competencies are assessed by the examinations committee at the end of a course. Additionally, VET also provides opportunities to develop social and personal skills. The level descriptors within the national qualifications framework encompass elements such as communication, problem solving, learning, and personal development skills. The learning methods employed in VET encompass self-directed learning, the practical application of knowledge, and workplace learning in diverse formats.²²

3. Subject and vocational skills

In academic secondary education, young people initially follow a general curriculum, and in the last two years take the following compulsory subjects:

- Dutch
- English
- physical education
- culture & the arts
- social studies
- mathematics (pre-university pupils only)
- a second foreign language (pre-university pupils only)²³

Students are also required to choose one of four subject combinations in which to specialise. These are: science and technology; science and health; economics and society; and culture and society²⁴. Students on academic pathways take either 7 or 8 of these subjects for their leaving examinations, with the remainder being assessed by teachers.

Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) is a four-year program that integrates both theoretical and practical training. In the initial two years, students follow a general curriculum, while the final two years concentrate on more specialised subjects. Upon the conclusion of the second year, students select an occupational sector in order to pursue additional vocational education and training, as well as prepare for their future careers. In the theoretical pathway (VMBO-T), there are four sectors available for students to choose from:

- care and welfare
- engineering and technology
- business
- agriculture

Students enrolled in the remaining VMBO pathways have the opportunity to select one profile from a range of ten options:

- Building, housing, and interiors
- Engineering, fitting out and energy
- Transport and mobility

²³ Government of the Netherlands, n.d.-c <https://www.government.nl/topics/secondary-education/different-types-of-secondary-education/senior-general-secondary-education-havo-and-pre-university-education-vwo>

²⁴ Ibid

- Media, design, and IT
- Maritime and technology
- Care and welfare
- Business and commerce
- Catering, baking, and leisure
- Animals, plants, and land
- Services and products.

Students have the opportunity to choose a sector or profile of their preference to study.

4. Teaching and learning approaches

In the Netherlands, the teaching and learning approach is characterised by a student-centred and interactive approach that is intended to encourage active participation, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Educational policy grants schools' significant autonomy in determining teaching methods, acknowledging teachers' understanding of students' needs. This results in differences among schools in structuring educational programs, with an increasing focus on diverse learning activities that encourage students to be independent and engaged participants.²⁵

Work experience and practical projects are integral components of vocational education programs (MBO). Students often participate in internships or apprenticeships to gain hands-on experience in their chosen field. While work experience and projects may be more prevalent in vocational programs, some academic courses may also incorporate practical elements, such as research projects, internships, or fieldwork, depending on the specific subject area.

²⁵ National Institute for Curriculum Development, n.d. https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Inclusive_Education_Netherlands.pdf

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