

Summary and recommendations

Learning and development during career

SER

SER advisory report

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Summary

In recent years, the Dutch Social Economic Council (SER) has reported on the need for continuous knowledge and skills development in the working population, driven by shifts in the labour market, for example the impact of digitisation, changes in time use, and closer cooperation between the education sector and civil society partners.

In its most recent advisory report on this topic, the Council considers the impact of its advisory reports (since issuing its first report on lifelong learning in 2002) and those authored by the Education Council and the Learning and Working Think Tank. While many of the recommended measures were adopted, there was either no follow-up or they were quickly reversed; as a result, they did not lead to a major rise in the number of adults participating in training activities.

In its report, the SER describes the impediments to participating in training: little sense of urgency, a lack of time or money, confusion about options or benefits and, in some instances, prior negative learning experiences.

The Council nevertheless lists several crucial reasons for those involved – workers, employers, government and educational institutions – to invest in continuous skills development. For example, it is important for working people to maintain their long-term employability, but to do so they must have the opportunity to take control of their learning. A skilled workforce is an economic and organisational advantage for employers; government too has reason enough to invest, considering the overall importance of a well-trained working population in boosting international competitiveness and alleviating pressure on the social welfare system. Educational institutions can broaden their market by offering post-initial learning pathways, and use their target group to connect with the professional world.

The urgent need for continuous training and the reasons for those involved to invest in continuous skills development have reaffirmed the SER's belief that the barriers can be

overcome and that mid-career learning must be encouraged. That encouragement can take different forms, which the Council has grouped into three sets of recommendations: reinforce the infrastructure, support the demand for learning, and create a learning culture.

To reinforce the *infrastructure*, the emphasis should shift to personalised learning and flexibility, and to meeting the demands of working people and employers. Institutions should be given more freedom to offer partial learning pathways and to organise their programmes to allow for more intake periods and different entry levels.

Another component of the infrastructure consists of the Sector Training & Development Funds (*O&O-fondsen*), which organise training programmes and skills development pathways in a variety of industries. With support, they could play a greater role in encouraging continuous skills development.

The know-how and experience that adults acquire through their work or other activities can also promote their career development. Validation of prior learning (VPL) can lead to a new job and/or shorten the time spent gaining formal credentials. They can make better use of such informal learning by having easy access to a transparent system that identifies and validates prior learning. The Council therefore favours the ongoing development of validation systems and standards.

The variety of different training and development pathways on offer is already enormous. So much so, in fact, that working people and employers need a “career development centre” to help them find their way. The SER advises using existing services to provide such career development support, for example work-training helpdesks, network café's, career advice and career prospects centres, and ensuring that working people retain control.

The infrastructure for people with low literacy skills requires particular attention and extra investment on the part of government, according to the Council. Assimilation and basic skills courses should once more become vital, employment-relevant, low-threshold services with a national, public guarantee of quality.

The SER sees two different methods to support the *demand for learning*: a “personal education account” with the right to withdraw “credit” for publicly funded education, and a “skills development savings account”.

All Dutch citizens have the right to a publicly-funded education, up to and including a Master’s degree programme. They also have the right to a publicly-funded upper secondary vocational education (unless they have already completed a programme at this level in the three years prior to enrolment). Few adults are aware of this right, however. The SER recommends developing a system of “personal education accounts” from which workers withdraw “credit” by attending publicly funded education; this will raise awareness of the education and training options available to them personally. By also giving working people the right to withdraw “credit” that they can spend on earning pass certificates at *any* accredited educational institution, personalised learning becomes possible and lifelong learning more appealing.

Working people should be able to continue their skills development even after using up their “credit” or beyond the publicly funded system of education. To encourage them in this, the SER proposes introducing a “skills development savings account” with tax breaks on savings set aside to pay for a skills development pathway. Employers, the Sector Training and Development Funds, the authorities and working people themselves can make deposits into the account to pay for a skills development pathway chosen by the latter. The pathway can consist of many different relevant career development activities, e.g. training, VPL, a second tertiary qualification, career counselling, etc. The idea is that the funds accrued in the skills development account will invite and incentivise working people to embark on a skills development pathway.

The SER recommends monitoring the effectiveness and costs of the credit withdrawal system and skills development savings account in the years ahead to ascertain their effectiveness and cost variations over time, and to correct for any negative effects.

The SER’s aim of making continuous learning and skills development a routine phenomenon in the Netherlands depends on having a broad *learning culture*. While it is important to send the right message of encouragement nationwide, much of the impetus will have to come from workers’ local networks. It is therefore important for employers to discuss employees’ careers with them regularly. The SER also recommends that employers give employees the opportunity to talk to an independent career counsellor. It is further critical to continuously raise awareness of the need for continuous learning in the workplace itself. One approach would be to focus more on informal learning and organise systems and activities that encourage it in the workplace.

The SER realises that it is harder for small and medium-sized enterprises to foster a learning culture than larger ones, but that culture is nevertheless important for all companies, regardless of size. Greater attention must therefore be devoted to developing a learning culture in small and medium-sized enterprises, in coordination with industry associations and regional business organisations.

The SER is aware of the need for more details before there can be any realistic indication of what its recommendations will cost government, employers and employees and how those costs will ultimately be recovered. The SER would be happy to help work out these details.

Skills development in the working population is also the subject of the National Skills Strategy, a joint project between the SER, the OECD, and the Dutch Ministries of Education, Employment, Economic Affairs, and Finance. In its advisory report, the Council recommends following up the Skills Strategy with a national agreement between the Government and stakeholders that will foster a strong learning culture in

which continuous learning and skills development become routine for everyone. The SER wishes to work with stakeholders on a broadly supported action agenda that will provide the basis for a national agreement, based in part on the OECD report on the Dutch Skills Strategy that was released April 2017. The action agenda will be presented to the new Government.

The recommendations

a. Reinforce the infrastructure for post-initial skills development

Flexible and practice-based options for personalised learning

- Amend regulations to allow publicly funded and private institutions for upper secondary vocational and higher professional education to offer robust certificate-based training pathways – ones that will have a positive impact on society.
- Help publicly funded institutions for upper secondary vocational and higher professional education develop personalised training for working people.
- See that educational institutions work more closely with the professional organisations in their region that employ their graduates.
- Encourage educational institutions to develop an alumni programme that will allow their alumni to advise them on working people's training needs so that they can anticipate and respond adequately.
- Encourage professional organisations (CSOs and businesses) to work more closely with educational institutions in the region. Get employers' associations to encourage their members to do so.
- Give institutions of upper secondary vocational education leeway and resources to offer personalised diploma- and certificate-based pathways to vulnerable groups of workers who have no or at most level 1 or 2 secondary vocational qualifications. Turn assimilation and basic skills courses into employment-relevant, low-threshold services.
- Get labour market regions to work on a human capital agenda if they so desire.

People with low literacy skills

- Turn assimilation and basic skills courses into employment-relevant, low-threshold services with a national, public guarantee of quality.
- Use informal learning opportunities among those with low literacy skills.
- Make it possible (financially) to integrate language learning pathways into upper secondary vocational education.

Sector Training & Development Funds

- Recognise the important role that the Sector Training & Development Funds play in maintaining worker knowledge and skills in industries by declaring Fund Agreements applicable across entire industries.
- Boost the role of the Funds in promoting mobility by means of co-funding/tax facilities meant to support general training and cross-industry skills development.
- Encourage the Sector Training & Development Funds to explore how they can do more to meet adults' (cross-industry) training needs and work together in the region.

Validation of prior learning and experience

- Encourage the use of VPL as part of employee career and skills development policy.
- Continue developing a differentiated set of validation systems and standards for recognising knowledge and experience and the outcomes of working and learning.
- Fund a national VPL expertise centre to provide information, conduct research and continue developing new VPL standards and other validation systems. Accreditation of providers may remain a private activity.
- Gauge the positive impact of VPL-style systems on society as well as their appeal for workers.
- Create a tax facility for VPL by accredited VPL providers (wage tax exemption if paid for from the skills development savings account, see below).
- Encourage educational institutions to recognise prior work experience and learning, to accept VPL (by awarding exemptions), and to offer personalised learning pathways by facilitating cooperation between the national VPL expertise centre, the Examinations Service Desk, educational institutions, and VPL providers (value chain approach).

- Encourage employers to accept registered certificates recognising the experience of skilled employees and job-seekers alongside the formal diplomas issued by educational institutions, which are intended mainly for entry-level professionals.

Career development via career development centres

- Ensure that employees and employers have access to low-threshold regional support for career development.
- To support career development, follow current trends among businesses that have joined forces in regional networks and platforms and in the Sector Training & Development Funds.
- Assign the functional tasks of the career development centre to existing services as much as possible, for example advisory centres, work-training helpdesks and training advice centres.
- See that government supports the creation and structuring of a set of functional tasks for career development and career support, for example to be carried out by career development centres. Make it possible for the centres to develop group and networking activities in which employees support and advise one another. The Social Security Agency (UWV) can lend assistance.

b. Support the demand for post-initial skills development

Utilise the right of withdrawal to use up spare “credit” for publicly-funded education

Extend the right to withdraw “credit” to flexible and accredited education

Extra costs of right of withdrawal

- See that government alerts workers to their right to withdraw “credit” by emphasising every worker’s and job-seeker’s personal right to a publicly funded diploma-based education. An individual’s right of withdrawal depends on how much “credit” he or she has already spent on the initial phase of publicly funded education (primary and general secondary).

- See that the right of withdrawal can be utilised as soon as an individual has left initial education and enters the labour market until shortly before he or she reaches retirement age.
- The SER advocates allowing accredited educational institutions to offer robust, certificate-based post-initial educational pathways. It is important for government to be clear about the way in which these certificate-based pathways are funded and how their quality will be guaranteed (see explanation below).
- Work out the precise details of the right to education and the right of withdrawal with the relevant parties.

Explanation of right of withdrawal recommendations

- The right of withdrawal is meant for individuals who have already completed the initial phase of their education but – unlike those with a Master’s degree – still have unused “credit”. They have the right to enrol in publicly funded programmes to spend the spare “credit” on obtaining higher or horizontal qualifications. The SER does not wish to abandon the royal road to a diploma in initial education. It wants to avoid a situation where young people take jobs before they finish school and postpone earning a diploma indefinitely.
- The SER would like publicly funded institutions to offer more personalised education and to have more leeway to do so.
- The SER anticipates that the demand among working people and employers for pass certificates (units of a full programme) in addition to a diploma or degree will increase due to changes in the labour market. The Council would like to see pass certificate initiatives being developed at every institution. That calls for a level playing field between accredited public and private institutions. The conditions have been described in the foregoing.

- The SER believes that if these conditions were in place, it would become possible for individuals to spend their spare “credit” on these (yet to be developed) certificate and diploma pathways at accredited public and private educational institutions. Before that happens, government must be clear about the requirements and funding.
- The SER would like to emphasise that in addition to the right of withdrawal, it should naturally also be possible to pay for learning pathways from the skills development savings account. This account can be used to cover a much broader range of learning and skills development activities.

Skills development savings account to cover post-initial skills development Circumstances offering encouragement

- Every individual will have the opportunity to open a skills development savings account; employees, employers and others may deposit funds into this account for purposes of professional skills development.
- The balance in the account may be spent on any relevant career development activities, for example to enrol in an (industry-)accredited training programme, to obtain a second tertiary qualification, to enrol in modules and pathways leading to a certificate, to pay for a career scan, career check, VPL-style pathways, etc.
- Government will introduce tax breaks on the balances in the skills development savings account.
- The social partners will use the account to encourage career development and can together agree on making collective (employer and employee) deposits into the account.
- The authorities can encourage skills development among special target groups directly by making deposits into skills development accounts or offering vouchers directly.
- A tax regime that encourages training should also provide leeway for any one-off budgets or vouchers that the social partners award from collective funds or based on collective agreements. That would allow the social partners to pursue a targeted policy of encouraging and helping certain groups in their business or industry to enrol in training.

Monitoring

- Monitor the changes in training behaviour and the learning culture. Where possible, conduct randomised experiments to find out precisely what does and does not work.
- Ensure that monitoring also detects any undesirable and unanticipated effects.

c. Arriving at an inviting and encouraging learning culture

National learning culture

- The national government and the social partners should launch a broad, positive campaign encouraging a national learning culture. The campaign should kick off during the introduction of the skills development savings account.

Raising awareness in the workplace

- An employer should schedule skills development interviews every year or every few years as part of its standard personnel policy. Flexible employees and those working on temporary contracts should also be eligible for this interview. Training and skills development should be emphasised during the interview.
- Government should support the initiative towards independent career counselling.

Informal learning

Special focus on small and medium-sized enterprises

- Employers and employees will benefit from a learning culture in their operations. It would therefore be preferable for businesses to build knowledge in this area.
- Special attention should be devoted to developing a learning culture in the SME sector, in coordination with industry organisations and regional business organisations.
- Learning ambassadors can play an important role in raising awareness of training in the workplace and in getting lower-skilled workers to work on improving their labour market position. Government should facilitate the training and supervision of regional learning ambassadors, the development of toolkits/special programmes for difficult target groups, the establishment and management of learning centres, and so on.

Colophon

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