

Shaping conditions for a flexible VET

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1.1 Flexibility: a systems' view

FLEXIBILITY SEEMS TO BE THE CORE CONCEPT of economic and educational change in our time. The promise of solutions to many problems at the individual, institutional, and national level evokes as much controversy as acclaim. This might be related to the different perspectives of actors and researchers involved in problem-solving in VET, where, on the one hand, solutions to VET should be sought in key qualifications and transferability, in changing teaching and learning processes, while, on the other hand, political, institutional, organisational, and professional conditions are seen as the key interventions to build a responsive workforce on the basis of a re-engineered VET system. Consequently, flexibility in connection with vocational education and training (VET) and the labour market has several divergent connotations. In this volume, we treat flexibility as a system characteristic of VET. Flexibility in this sense is an input/throughput factor for the delivery of required competencies to respond to social and economic demands in the various economies in the European community. Nijhof & Streumer (1994) present a cognitive map of flexibility in VET, in which three types of flexibility are presented, corresponding to the input, throughput, and output of VET. Input flexibility concerns the responsiveness of VET systems to changing skill demands, e.g. as a consequence of the emerging knowledge economy. Throughput flexibility concerns the capacity of VET systems to deal with individual differences amongst students, e.g. by designing different pathways to becoming skilled. Output flexibility refers to the transferability of skills and the mobility of trainees. Raffae (1994) presents four types of flexibility: curricular flexibility (comparable to input), flexibility of delivery and pathways (comparable to throughput), and individual flexibility (or transferability and mobility). Especially this last form of flexibility has elicited a major political debate on social equality and exclusion, as reported by Coffield (2002), referring to the undesirable effects of the flexibilisation of VET on social equality and the division of labour. Felstead, Ashton & Green (2001) report a direct relation between labour market flexibility and skill development. The skills of part-timers and flexible workers have deteriorated, compared to those working full-time. Felstead (in press) also reports the development of regional skill differences, related to regional economic development. In the UK debate, flexibility is contested with labour political issues, especially around individual flexibility. In the Dutch context, Hartog (1996) refers to the same debate, stating that "... the new economic order asks for an increased flexibility of workers on the one hand (higher skills, life long learning), but on the other hand for job security. Flexibility should be translated in trainability and learning skills and not in external flexibility."

Transferability and mobility (individual flexibility) can be seen as outcomes of educational investments: transferability refers to the cognitive results for students,

in terms of sustainable competencies and skills, which equip students well for lifelong learning and working. Mobility refers to the socio-economic results for students, in terms of gateways and passports to a labour market where lifetime employment is exchanged for lifetime employability. Both transferability and mobility have acquired new meaning in the light of an emerging knowledge-based economy, in which changing skill requirements and changing market conditions are the only certainties left (Nijhof, Kieft & Van Woerkom, 2001). To prepare students for the future, European VET and VET systems should be responsive and proactive towards future developments. This requires an enormous curricular and throughput flexibility or adaptability at all levels in the different VET systems.

Systemic flexibility is the main subject of this book. In order to deliver transferable skills and foster students' mobility in a knowledge-based economy, VET is in search of new ways of political governance, institutional set ups, organisational and curriculum designs in all European countries. However, we do not expect to end up in one European VET system. The national systems are deeply rooted in cultural, political, educational, and socio-economic traditions and institutions. These systems are quite diverse, and the expectations of stakeholder groups like students, parents, teachers, employers, and politicians are closely connected to these traditions and institutions, resulting in country-bound public and private skilling systems, although migration and immigration in Europe is putting great pressure on the current ideologies, politics, and pathways to skill formation. These insights outline the playing field for the present book.

Shaping flexibility in VET means analysing the conditions and implications to be found in the institutional and political context of VET systems, in the socioeconomic expectations of stakeholders, reified in regular pathways to the labour market, in the organisational design of VET inside colleges and companies, in the educational tools, such as pathways, curricula, learning materials and assessment procedures, and, last but certainly not least, in the professional expectations and ambitions of teachers and trainers. These conditions form the context for powerful teaching and learning environments in which the formal and non-formal skilling processes will take place. Learning is context-bound and, while VET systems are designed to skill people in context, these three groups of conditions seem to be essential for shaping flexibility (see Figure 1.1.).

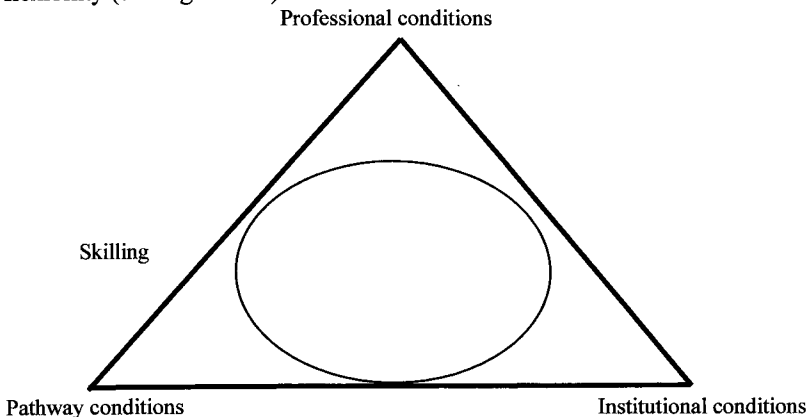


Figure 1.1 Shaping conditions for flexibility and skill formation.

This overview of themes forms the problem definition of and the challenge for this book. For such a complex social system as VET, a wide variety of conditions have to be met, to reach the systemic flexibility needed in the near future. To organise this variety, the book is divided into three main parts. After this introductory section, the second section deals with the changing economic conditions that VET is confronted with, and the consequences it will have on the institutional and organisational conditions of a flexible VET. The third section deals with pathways and curriculum designs, evaluation, and assessment as a means to respond to the economic challenges through flexibility (Nijhof, Kieft & Van Woerkom, 2001; Raffe, 1994); in this section, particular attention is given to system change in some specific European countries. The fourth section is focused on the roles, tasks, and future demands of VET professionals, and the challenges they are confronted with. Before going in depth into the different sections and individual contributions, a framework is presented to analyse in greater depth connections between the various sections and conditions involved.

1.2 Governance of change in VET

In this section, an analytical frame (see Figure 1.2.) will be presented for the governance of change in vocational education and training. The basic perspective is the idea that changing complex social systems need coherent, persistent, and consistent political actions at all levels of the systems, e.g. political debate and legislation, institutional setup, organisational and financial conditions, and the design of skilling systems and processes should be in line with each other. In order to realise system flexibility, change is needed at all system levels.

VET is a rather complex social system, because it is located on the edge of two basic human activities: learning and working (Ellström, 1999). For both activities, systems have to be built at local, national, and European levels. Within VET, these systems are intertwined in many ways. Changing VET is thus a long-lasting enterprise, requiring interactions and debates inside and between the different interest groups of the system. In this section, these ideas and models are built into a comprehensive model for changing VET systems, to prepare them for the emerging learning society. According to Edquist and Johnson (1997), social systems are specific set ups of institutions and organisations. Social systems are designed incrementally to reach societal goals:

- Institutions can be defined as sets of common habits, routines, rules, or laws that regulate the relations and interactions between individuals and groups. Functions of institutions are, for example, the provision of information and the reduction of uncertainty; managing conflicts and cooperation; the provision of incentives; the channelling of resources;
- Organisations are formal structures with an explicit purpose; they are consciously created and they are players and actors in the system.