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Heemskerk, E.; Zeitlin, J.

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Public-private partnerships in Dutch vocational education and training: Learning, monitoring and governance

Memo for Platform Bèta Techniek - *Dr. Eelke Heemskerk (UvA, Galan Groep) & Prof. dr. Jonathan Zeitlin (UvA)*
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Dynamiek onderweg

1   Introduction

Good vocational education and training (VET) is the basis of a 'learning economy' (WRR 2013) and plays a crucial role for the innovative capacity of a society. A necessary precondition for excellent VET is strong and effective ties between educational institutions and businesses. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) bring together schools, businesses, sectoral organizations, local and regional authorities, and other stakeholders to enhance the quality of VET and by doing so to stimulate innovation.

In the Netherlands, recent efforts to develop PPPs in VET have focused on the creation of Centres of Expertise in higher vocational education (HBO) and Centra voor Innovatieve Vakmanschap (Centres for Innovative Craftsmanship) in middle vocational education (MBO). There are now more than 40 Centres actively working on PPP in VET across the Netherlands. Substantial funds, both public (to the tune of 250 mio euros) and private, have been invested in these Centres over the past few years, and additional money for their development is envisaged, for example through the Regional Investment Funds announced by the recent Technology Pact (Techniekpact).

The 2014 Midterm Review conducted by the Platform Bèta Techniek (PBT) of the seven pilot centres established in 2011 (three in the HBO and four in the MBO sector) show that these investments have already led to significant positive results. These include: increases in the numbers of students enrolling in study programs linked to the centres in both HBO and MBO, as well as in the throughput (doorstroom) from MBOs to HBOs; the development of contract research financed by associated businesses (mainly in the HBO Centres of Excellence); some innovative initiatives in further education and training (bijscholing), for example between Nedcar and the Centrum voor Innovatief Vakmanschap voor Onderhoud in Mobiliteit (CIVOM); growing co-financing of investments by businesses and local/regional authorities (again mainly in the HBO Centres); and steady progress in the institutional development of both types of Centres as they move into the implementation and validation phase of their business plans (see radar chart in the Midterm Review, Platform Bèta Techniek 2014).

At the same time, however, there are also a number of areas where the initial goals of the pilot Centres have proved more difficult to achieve. These include: levels of recruitment into newly established 'talent' and 'excellence' programs; the absence of spin-offs/new business start-ups from the Centres; and limited expansion of lifelong learning activities (om-, bij-, & nascholing). Especially in the MBO Centres for Innovative Craftsmanship, contract research for private companies and co-financing investments from both businesses and educational institutions have run seriously behind the levels envisaged in their original business plans, raising questions about their long-term financial sustainability.

Beyond the broad-gauge differences between the HBO and MBO PPP Centres, the PBT Midterm Review shows that there are also significant variations within each type of Centre in terms of their strategic orientation (towards improvement of initial education or provision of innovative services to firms and organizational structure (freestanding or based in a specific educational institution). These variations in strategy and structure can in turn be related (but not reduced) to differences in the nature of the industrial sectors and regional economies in which the Centres are embedded, notably the degree of specialization and the density of network ties among local firms. Innovation is increasingly organized in ecosystems, building on the strengths and particularities of different regional clusters.

Some ecosystems are more localized, with a rich population of firms with dense

connections with one another within and across sectors, sometimes with a regional board that coordinates their activities. The opportunities and challenges for a Centre here are quite different than in a diversified metropolitan area or an isolated rural setting, where activity is much less sectorally concentrated (Van der Toren and Lie 2014). Variations in economic development policies and investment strategies of local and regional authorities add further to the environmental diversity, including of funding opportunities, to which individual Centres must respond.

The experience of the pilot PPP Centres raises a number of pressing questions about how to embed them in the broader innovation system as well as in the institutional framework governing education in the Netherlands as the initial experimental initiative expands to a nationwide system of more than 40 Centres.

First, there is the challenging issue of how to combine the emergence of new forms of public-private partnership with a system of governance that safeguards the quality of education and ensures accountability for the use of public money. Most fundamentally, the problem lies in the innovative character of the centers. Their goal is to devise new forms of public-private cooperation, and to develop new organizational forms for vocational education and training. This implies that the day-to-day practices of these centers will be different from the established routines of the HBO and MBOs. The Centres need room to experiment. But the current system of accountability for Dutch educational institutions is based on a combination of ex ante rules and ex post controls, derived from established routines and practices. It has been recognized that there is a mismatch between the current forms of governance and accountability on the one hand and the innovative ambitions of the Centres on the other (Commissie Van der Touw, 2013). In order to make the national system of Centres successful, it is necessary to solve this conundrum and introduce a system of external governance that allows both for innovation and for ongoing monitoring and accountability.

Second, the success of PPPs in VET is dependent on the capacity for learning and cross-fertilization across different initiatives. In searching for effective and innovative forms of PPPs, it is inevitable that there will be (partial) failures as well as successes. We have seen from the Midterm Review that none of the pilot Centres have fully succeeded thus far in achieving all their goals, while within each category some Centres have been more effective than others in discovering innovative ways of engaging business partners and enhancing the quality and quantity of their educational programs. Where the system of monitoring and accountability allows for cross-institutional learning, such good and bad practices can be used to identify opportunities for creative problem-solving and continuous improvement of PPPs at both an individual and a systemic level. The Van der Touw Committee underscored this point as well when it stressed that for an innovative scheme such as the Centres it is crucial that learning takes place (Commissie Van der Touw 2013, second recommendation). Such learning enhances the quality of PPPs, speeds up the diffusion of innovation, and allows for an efficient use of public and private investments. The current system of accountability and governance is not specifically geared to support cross-institutional learning and continuous improvement.

Third, it is important to recognize the diversity of regional economic ecosystems within which the Centres are operating, as well as the variations in strategy and structure they have developed in response to these differing environments. This means that in assessing the performance of the Centres, it is important to take such contextual differences into account, and one-size-fits-all metrics will not work. But the variations in strategy and structure across the Centres also enhance the opportunities for mutual learning from one another's practices and performance.

These three issues boil down to the question how to integrate the reporting and accountability obligations for the PPPs at the regional and national level into a system of external governance that promotes learning and innovation but at the same time delivers the necessary accountability at all levels. In what follows we sketch the outline of a system of external governance that is designed to deliver on both counts.

2 A learning-oriented system of external governance

Careful monitoring and comparison of the performance of different approaches in different local contexts is crucial to support creative problem-solving and continuous improvement. Therefore we want to create a learning-oriented system of external governance. This is particularly important for the Centres because of their innovative character: we do not yet know what the most successful Centres will look like. And even the most successful centers will regularly need to adapt and revise their plans and practices as they develop. Learning means first and foremost that we recognize that we can always develop a better understanding of what the best, most effective or most efficient public-private partnerships are. A learning-oriented system of governance therefore means that Centers can adapt their practices and goals in light of comparative implementation experience. It also means that criteria for evaluation can be revised in light of experience with their application. And in a learning-oriented governance system, it should be possible to propose revisions to the overarching system (goals, metrics, procedures) of superordinate institutions to which the Centres are accountable.

Such a system of governance fundamentally links learning and monitoring. Learning must not be a standalone activity but integrated in an ongoing process of monitoring and accountability. Centres will not invest in the mutual learning process unless they perceive it as crucial to their core mission. If learning is organized apart from monitoring it often leads to a situation where the best show off and where those in need of assistance will perhaps pick up some tips, at best. But if we want to stimulate learning, it needs to be integrated with the system of monitoring and evaluation. The output of the monitoring process is used to identify learning possibilities, both positive and negative. Integrating monitoring and learning is not self-evident and often these activities are deliberately kept separated from each other. The underlying reason for this is typically that the process of monitoring is linked directly to the accountability over the expenditure of (public) funds. Negative results may have direct consequences for the continuity of the PPP, if the funding agent decides to stop or reduce its contributions. With so much at stake, it is in the interest of the monitored party to demonstrate success. Sharing good and bad practices in an open and constructive manner than seems quite incompatible with the monitoring process. However, this is not an optimal situation, as Centres will hold back on information

in the monitoring process, while the most sensitive information will not be shared in the mutual learning process. A necessary precondition for allowing for both learning and monitoring is that there is room for revision of performance indicators in the light of (shared) experiences.

A well-established and practical system that integrates monitoring, learning and accountability is experimentalist governance. Experimentalist governance is a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts. The experimentalist form of governance deliberately establishes provisional frameworks for action and elaborates and revises these in light of recursive review of efforts to implement them in various contexts (for a concise introduction, see Sabel and Zeitlin 2012 and appendix 6 to Commissie Van der Touw 2013).

Experimentalist governance in its most developed form involves a multi-level architecture, whose four elements are linked in an iterative cycle. First, broad framework goals and metrics for gauging their achievement are provisionally established by some combination of 'central' and 'local' units, in consultation with relevant stakeholders. For the Centres, these are the overarching policy goals, such as to raise the quality of education and the inflow into initial educational programs; to make a direct contribution to the innovative capacity of firms; to enhance the mobility and flexibility of current employees through life-long learning; and to promote cooperation between entrepreneurs, educational institutions and government (Platform Bèta Techniek 2014). Second, local units such as educational institutions or Centres are given broad discretion to pursue these goals in their own way. But, third, as a condition of this autonomy, these units must report regularly on their performance and participate in a peer review in which their results are compared with those of others employing different means to the same ends. Where they are not making good progress against the agreed indicators, the local units are expected to show that they are taking appropriate corrective measures, informed by the experience of their peers. Fourth and finally, the goals, metrics, and decision-making procedures themselves are periodically revised by a widening circle of actors in response to the problems and possibilities revealed by the review process, and the cycle repeats.

Figure 1: Experimentalist governance of PPPs in vocational education
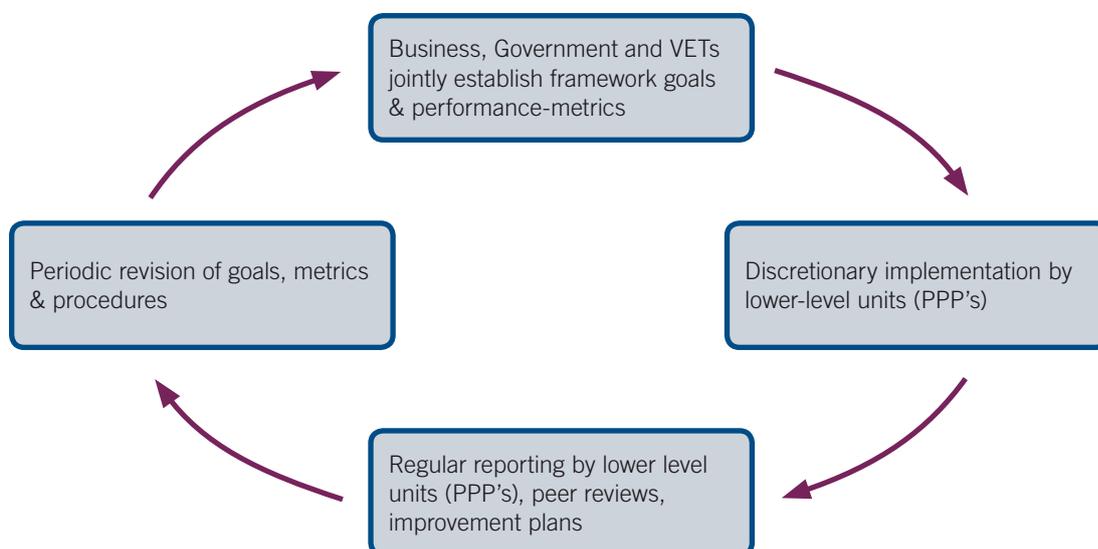
This approach responds to the widely acknowledged failures of 'command-and-control' regulation in a turbulent, fast-moving world. In such a world, fixed rules written by a hierarchical authority become obsolete too fast to be effectively enforced on the ground and the resulting gap between rules and practice is bridged by an unaccountable proliferation of discretionary waivers and exceptions. The alternative approach is to build on and monitor organizations' own error detection and correction mechanisms by requiring them to develop systematic, verifiable plans for identifying and mitigating possible hazards in their operations in light of available knowledge about failures in similar settings. Experimentalism correspondingly diverges not only from conventional hierarchical governance, but also from other contemporary reform movements focused on reinforcing principal-agent relations, whether from the top-down, as in the New Public Management (NPM), or from the bottom-up, as in devolved or 'interactive' governance.

Experimentalism is based neither on a sharp separation between policy conception and administrative execution as in conventional hierarchical governance and NPM, nor on their fusion in the hands of local communities or citizens' councils as in interactive governance. Instead, it is based on the reciprocal redefinition of ends and means through an iterated, multi-level cycle of provisional goal-setting and revision, thereby giving structure to apparently fluid practices of 'network governance'.

Experimentalist governance architectures of this type have become pervasively institutionalized in the EU across a broad array of policy domains. These stretch from regulation of energy, financial services, and competition through food and drug safety, data privacy, and environmental protection to justice and internal security, employment promotion, social inclusion, and fundamental rights. They take a variety of organizational forms, including networked agencies, councils of national regulators, open methods of coordination, and operational cooperation among front-line officials, often in combination with one another (Sabel and Zeitlin 2008, 2010). Governance architectures with similar properties are also widespread in the US, both in the reform of public services like education and child welfare, and in the regulation of public health and safety risks, such as nuclear power, food processing, and environmental pollution (Sabel and Simon 2011).

Box 1: Diagnostic Monitoring and Systemic Learning in US Social Services

A key feature of experimentalist governance is a distinctive form of diagnostic monitoring that uses intensive scrutiny of individual cases to reveal systemic problems. A particularly well-developed example is the Quality Service Review (QSR) used in child welfare programs in Utah and several other states in the USA. The QSR begins with selection of a stratified random sample of cases. A two-person team, including an agency official and an outside reviewer, examines the case over two days, beginning with a file review and proceeding to interviews with the child, family members, non-family caregivers, professional team members, and others with pertinent information.

The reviewers then score the case numerically in terms of one set of indicators concerning the well-being of the child and his or her family and a second concerning the capacity to build teams, make assessments, formulate and update plans, and execute the plans. The initial scoring is refined in meetings among the reviewers, and then between review teams and the caseworkers and supervisors whose decisions they have reviewed. The final report presents the aggregate scoring and identifies recurring problems with illustrations of these from specific cases.

The QSR is both a process of norm elaboration and compliance enforcement. Agency goals like child safety and family stability ('permanence') are indeterminate in the abstract. The QSR helps establish paradigmatic instances of their meaning and the processes for achieving them. Participation by officials from the child welfare department's central administration promotes consistency across regions. Similarly, QSR data measures performance and helps diagnose systemic problems. The scores can be compared over time, giving rough but serviceable indications of where to focus remedial effort.

Sources: Noonan et al. (2009); Sabel and Simon (2011)

Box 2: Peer Review and Mutual Learning in EU Multi-Level Coordination of Social and Employment Policy

A well-developed example of the operation of peer review and mutual learning in a multi-level setting is the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) processes on employment and social protection/inclusion organized by the EU since the early 2000s. Within these OMC processes, the EU institutions and the Member States together establish broad common European objectives, policy guidelines, and indicators for assessing progress towards them, which are periodically revised in light of implementation experience. Member States have substantial freedom under EU principles of subsidiarity to pursue these common goals in ways adapted to their own national situation and institutional setting, but must report regularly on their strategic plans and performance against the agreed metrics.

These national reports (sometimes called Action Plans or Reform Programmes) are then peer reviewed by Member State representatives within the EU Employment and Social Protection Committees, with the aim both of identifying areas for improvement on the part of the country being reviewed, and of pulling out broader lessons for other Member States facing similar problems. Alongside these country-specific reviews, the Employment and Social Protection Committees also organize regular thematic reviews on key current problems, aimed at fostering mutual learning and stimulating multilateral discussion on promising approaches to tackling specific policy challenges. Such thematic reviews often use innovative formats such as inviting countries performing weakly in a particular area to examine those achieving better outcomes. The intensity of both types of peer review within these committees has sharply increased in recent years in response to the EU's post-crisis economic governance reforms, since the evidence gathered through 'mutual surveillance' of each others' National Reform Programmes can serve to justify amendments of the Country-Specific Recommendations proposed by the Commission (which can ultimately lead to financial sanctions in certain cases under the new Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure).

In addition to these internal reviews of Member States' plans and performance, both committees also organize an extensive programme of voluntary offline peer reviews of good national practices. In these programmes, Member States which believe that they have developed a particularly good practice in an area of broader common interest (such as 'one-stop-shops' for activation services, or an innovative approach to combatting homelessness) host peer review seminars (of one-and-a half days) in which representatives of other Member States, including independent experts, social partners, and NGOs as well as national officials, are invited to participate. These seminars frequently involve site visits as well as presentations on the operation of the programme or practice by a range of governmental and non-governmental experts. The discussions in these seminars focus both on identifying the key factors that contribute to the success of the good practice in its local context, and on the modifications that might be required to adapt it to other national and regional settings.

Sources: Barcevicius et al. (2014); Vanhercke and Lelie (2012)

3 A practical architecture for governance and learning for PPPs in Dutch VET

The Centers have been introduced as a new way of increasing the quality and innovative capacity of Dutch vocational education and training through effective public-private partnerships. Now that the first reviews have been completed, it is clear that the basic approach is promising, but also that there are continuing challenges in achieving some of the original goals, as well as wide differences in strategy, structure, and performance across the Centres. This makes the question how to structurally embed these new organizational forms in the Dutch educational and innovation landscape a timely and pressing issue, as the initial set of pilot Centres expands into a comprehensive national system. The success of these PPPs in the longer-term is dependent on a well-functioning system of external governance.

The principles of experimentalist governance provide the building blocks of such a system. It needs to be a national governance system that includes a system of learning and review, which takes into account the diversity across ecosystems and Centres. We distinguish between three main levels in the system of governance. First, there is the regional level where Centres are part and parcel of particular ecosystems. We call this regional, but note that an ecosystem is not necessarily geographically restricted; it might also cover an industrial sector, which is distributed across the national territory. Second, the network level comprises the group of centres as a whole. Here, learning through peer review and sharing of experience takes place. Third, at the national level there is an overarching system of monitoring and oversight. Figure 2 illustrates this multi-level system.
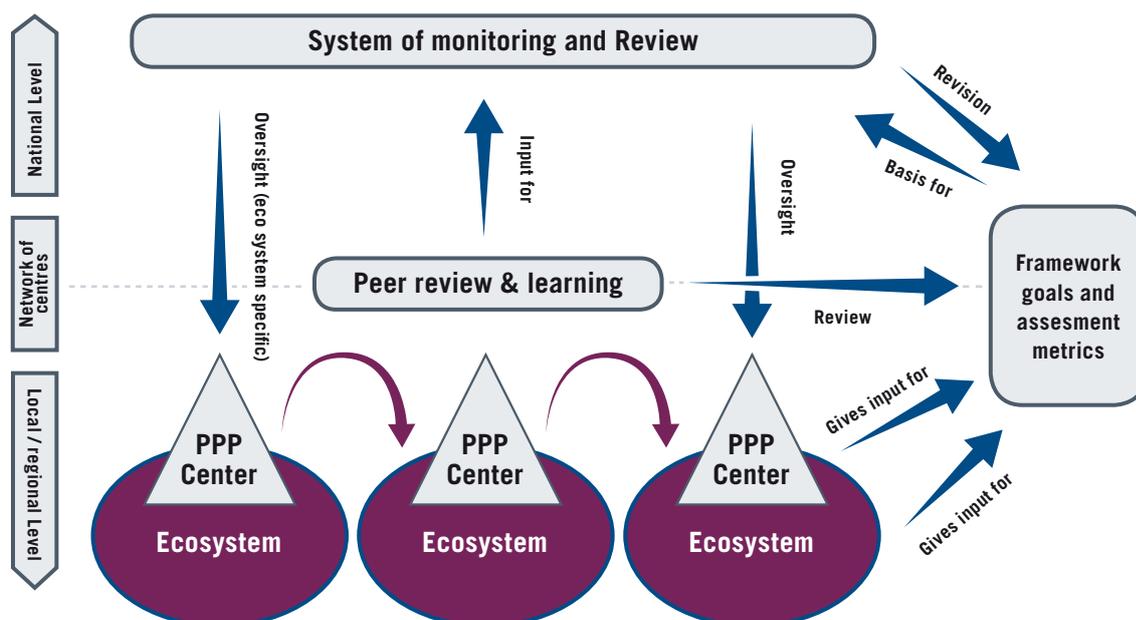

Figure 2: *A Multilevel learning-oriented governance system for PPP in VET*

Regional governance

At the regional level, the public-private partnership takes shape. Here, educational institutions work together with businesses and other stakeholders to increase the quality of vocational education, stimulate innovation, create conditions for lifelong learning and so on. A key issue for the entire governance system is to ensure a 'fit' between the activities of the Centres and the region or ecosystem in which they participate. A possible way to streamline, organize and make such ecosystems effective is to establish a forum to bring all the parties together. This forum provides an overarching framework for deliberation between firms and educational institutions. In many cases, there are already regional governance structures for economic development, such as Economic or Strategy Boards (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Twente) or Brainport Development. Such bodies are also in a position to support applications by the Centres for Innovative Craftsmanship for additional grants from the Regional Investment Funds established by the Technology Pact where these are in line with their vision for regional development.

At the regional level it is necessary to set the appropriate level of aspiration for each of the performance indicators that have been established at the national level. This allows for uniformity in the national governance system while taking into account regional diversity. There are common metrics but one cannot expect the same performance in different settings.

The regional level provides input to the framework goals and is actively involved in setting the most relevant performance indicators and metrics for its particular ecosystem. The PPPs are expected to engage a broad set of regional stakeholders in this discussion, including relevant stakeholders who may not yet be actively involved in the PPP. Taking account of regional needs is important but difficult because it seems to run counter to national-level uniformity. We see this for instance with regards to qualifications for middle vocational education. Although MBO institutions have strong working relations with a set of businesses, especially through the organization of in-firm training placements, these stakeholders currently have very limited influence on the qualification criteria for the degrees. Instead, qualifications criteria are set at the national level, without much consideration for regional needs. While this memo does not explicitly discuss the governance of qualification criteria, the underlying logic and reasoning of our approach would favor a situation where also in these instances regional needs are systematically taken into account. The new qualification structure that is currently being developed may already provide steps in this direction.

Where a Centre's mission and activities cuts across regional lines, or has a predominately sectoral focus spread across the national territory, other relevant regional authorities and industry associations should be involved in providing input into the framework goals and performance metrics. The opportunity to influence the strategic direction of PPPs in VET may also serve as a stimulus for the development of a stronger and more coherent economic development vision in regions where this does not already exist.

Network-level governance

At the network level, Centres interact to exchange experiences and promote learning. The goal here is to set up a system that promotes learning and at the same time serves as an interface to the monitoring and reporting the Centres have to do for the bodies to which they are accountable. It also speaks to the recommendation of the Van der Touw Committee to organizer peer reviews in order to increase learning among the Centres

(Commissie Van der Touw, p.14). Given the broad-gauged differences between HBOs and MBOs, it would be natural to organize peer review activities separately across the two groups of Centres. But it would also be important to provide opportunities for mutual learning and exchange of good practices between the two groups of Centres, especially around issues of cooperation on joint projects and throughput (doorstroom) of students from MBOs to HBOs.

Such peer review and mutual learning activities could take a number of forms (following the model of the EU Employment and Social Protection Committees described in Box 2 above). First, Centres could be asked to review one another's annual progress reports, and discuss their relative performance against agreed national and regional metrics in manageable sub-groups, with a diagnostic focus on identifying the reasons for performance shortfalls and opportunities for improvement based on the experience of more successful performers. Second, the Centres could identify specific problematic themes (such as contract research in MBOs or talent programs in HBOs) for in-depth review through comparison of good and bad performers. Finally, Centres which believe that they have developed a particularly good practice or program in a key area could be invited to host an onsite peer review seminar for other interested Centres aimed at exploring the opportunities for cross-institutional transfer and adaptation.

Participation in such review activities would be attractive to the Centres because it would give them an opportunity to present their operations to peers in a position to understand them and provide practically useful feedback because they are involved in similar activities. For the same reason, such peer institutions are also better placed than external inspectors or auditors to evaluate critically each other's explanations for any performance shortfalls. To ensure the effectiveness of these peer reviews, their results should be taken into account by the bodies formally responsible for reviewing the Centres' performance. This should also help to ensure that the peer reviews remain sufficiently candid and critical, since overly soft and mutually deferential performance assessments would quickly lose credibility in the eyes of external accountability bodies.

Centres performing well in these peer reviews according to the agreed metrics would benefit by an enhanced reputational standing that should help them to attract additional grants and contracts from the Regional Investment Funds, sectoral research and education (O&O) funds, regional Economic Development Boards, and private business partners. Centres performing poorly in these reviews would be expected to prepare credible improvement plans drawing on the experience of similarly-placed peer institutions, while those persistently failing to improve would face reorganization or eventual closure on the recommendation of a national Review Committee (discussed in the next paragraph).

National-level governance

At the national level, a formal review committee should monitor and assess the activities of the Centers. Here again, it would be natural to organize the review of the HBO and MBO Centres separately, while taking account of interconnections between the two groups. The Review Committee should be external to and independent of the Centers, but all stakeholders should involved in creating the evaluation framework, including regional economic development fora and the Ministry of Economic Affairs (EZ) as well as the Ministry of Education and Culture (OCW). This framework should contain explicit and ambitious framework goals as well as a set of agreed upon and operational performance indicators. The metrics used to monitor and assess the performance of the Centers should therefore be the outcome of deliberation between the Review Committee and the network

of centers, as well as other stakeholders. Units that are going to be monitored should have a voice in determining the relevant metrics.

Based on the problems and possibilities revealed by the Centres' own peer reviews, as well as by the work of the independent Review Committee, the framework goals, metrics, and governance procedures for the system of PPPs should be periodically reviewed and revised. Here again, such review and revision should be the outcome of deliberation among all relevant stakeholders.

Another good example of national-level governance according to experimentalist principles is the recommendation of the Van der Touw Committee (2013) to create 'room for development' (*ontwikkelruimte*) for the Centres. When Centres are confronted with structural problems that stand in the way of reaching the framework goals, a Forum of key stakeholders can allow for a temporary deviation from the (limiting) rules and regulations. The Committee suggests that this Forum comprise the relevant departments (OCW, EZ, Financien), the oversight bodies (belastingdienst, onderwijsinspectie), and the participants in the Centres (business and vocational eduction institutions). Together, these stakeholders can allow for temporary room for development but can also suggest changes in the framework goals and metrics in the light of the shared ambitions.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

An effective system of external governance and monitoring that ensures accountability while at the same time stimulates learning is an important ingredient for the long-term success of PPPs in Dutch vocational education and training. This memo sketches the basic architecture of such a governance systems and outlines how it could work in practice. It provides for an institutional framework where PPPs become a structural part of VET policy and financing. PPP should not be considered as something separate or additional, but as an integral part of the core business of the national VET system.

The aim of these proposals is to create an authoritative system of learning-oriented review and evaluation which can hope, by force of reputation and attraction to be accepted by other providers of finance, both public and private, as well as central government. This would have the added advantage of significantly decreasing the administrative burden on the Centres of reporting separately to multiple sources of funding.

In summary, we suggest a governance system where the national system of review takes into account the specific needs of particular regions and ecosystems. This would be a system where local level actors are actively engaged in determining the performance indicators as well as setting the appropriate performance level. It would also be a system where peer review among PPPs is an important source for institutional learning, while at the same time the peer reviews and learning experiences provide important input for the national-level review.

PPPs need room to experiment and actually engage in innovative partnerships. At the same time, the quality of education need to be ensured. A system of governance based on experimental principles allows for this, while at the same time optimizing opportunities for learning. As such, it represents a vital practical contribution to the ongoing success of PPPs in Dutch vocational education and training.

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