**Quality assurance of regionally developed optional vocational subjects in pre-vocational education (PVE)**

**Profiles in PVE; a new perspective**

*From the school year 2016-2017 onwards, a new system of profiles will be used in pre-vocational education (PVE). The aim of the new system is to improve the quality of PVE: the content of the vocational exam programmes has been renewed and its structure has been altered. The profiles offer PVE schools new perspectives with regards to the following themes:*

* *An improvement of organisation: broadening the profile subjects enables schools to work with larger groups of students than what is currently feasible in the system of departmental subjects, intra- and intersectoral programmes. Simultaneously, the vocational optional subjects enable (explicit) education to smaller groups of students.*
* *More possibilities for made-to-measure education: the optional subjects can supplement the profile subject in a variety of ways. The optional subjects can be related to the profile subject, but not necessarily. There are optional subjects which broaden the profile (resulting in a multidisciplinary set of examination subjects) as well as optional subjects which deepen the profile (resulting in a more in-depth set of subjects aimed at a certain profession).*
* *More possibilities for orientation: schools can choose to offer optional subjects to allow students to familiarize themselves with a certain profession and to prepare them for choosing a profile and a continuing education course. For example, the optional subjects can be a part of the Career Education and Guidance programme (CEG) of the school.*
* *A recognizable range of options: the broad profile subjects combined with the more in-depth ones make for a higher familiarity of the range of possible professions for students, parents, continuing education, and finally the (regional) employers. It is clear what they learn and why. Clear, recognizable, and useful optional subjects also contribute positively to students’ personal development: most PVE students are good at their vocational subject. With the new system, they can demonstrate and develop their skills not only with the profile subject, but also with the four different optional subjects.*
* *A flexible range of options: the new system not only enables schools to meet the students’ specific needs, it also allows them to accommodate their offer of subjects to suit the needs of the region. Schools should anticipate a rapidly changing environment. They will be able to quickly respond to changing demands in the education- and job market by means of optional vocational subjects. A range of optional subjects has already been developed within this project, but schools are also free to develop their own optional subjects, in collaboration with their region.*
* *Cooperation with and an insight into the region is a necessity: PVE needs a better connection with continuing education and the job market. This can be achieved by gaining insights into local job markets. Cooperation with the region has become a prerequisite for good education. The number of PVE students moving on to continuing education will increase if the PVE-education offer is properly adjusted to continuing education and the job market. It may even be possible to have optional subjects that are adjusted to SSVE (senior secondary vocational education) to such a degree that they can result in an exemption from the subject in SSVE. Education that has been adjusted to the region also meets the needs of PVE/SSVE students who would like to work in the region where they grew up.*

**Preconditions and starting points of quality assurance**

Departing from the above-mentioned principles, the ministry of education has formulated a number of preconditions and starting points for quality assurance. On the one hand, they have done so in order to realise the optional vocational subjects, and on the other hand to advance the distinctness and quality of the optional subjects.

1. **Preconditions and starting points for realisation and development**

* Reconsidering profiles and optional subjects and deciding to develop new optional subjects can play a decisive role in the ‘new direction’ a school takes.
* Schools are not allowed to develop optional subjects by themselves; they have to do so in cooperation with the region.
* Good cooperation and connection with the region will be optimally advanced if the number of optional subjects that a school is allowed to develop is not restricted.

1. **Preconditions and starting points for distinctness and quality**

* The distinctness and transparency of optional subjects can be advanced if all subjects get a code and are registered in a public national register of optional subjects. By means of the code and register, it is always retrievable what exactly a student has learned.
* The quality of the optional subjects on offer can be guaranteed if all schools offer their subjects based on their previously acquired expertise. This expertise relates to the permitted selection of subjects at the schools.
* The quality of the school exams can be advanced if teachers can share and optimize their exams with other teachers. The development of a national database for school exam items can contribute to the advancement of the quality.
* Stating a student’s name and grade on the list of marks that comes with the diploma increases the distinctness of the vocational exam programme.

**Framework of guidelines and requirements**

The perspective, preconditions and starting points have resulted in the following framework of guidelines and requirements for optional vocational subjects:

* A public national register for optional vocational subjects will be set up.
* Schools will be able to consult the national register in order to determine whether a new optional subject is really new. This will ensure that schools are not going to ‘re-invent the wheel’. The register also stimulates the sharing of knowledge. Schools can use previously developed optional subjects and optimize them in cooperation with local employers for use in their own region.

NB. In the last case, it is up to the school to decide whether the new optional subject needs a new code, or whether the existing code is sufficient for registration. If it needs a new code, the subject has to be submitted for registration in the national register.

* Schools are allowed to offer a maximum of two out of four modules from a profile as optional subjects, if they are not licensed to teach this profile.

NB. If a schools wants to offer new subjects (or expand the offer), they can arrange this via the ‘Regionaal Plan Onderwijsvoorzieningen’ (Regional Plan Educational Services).

* A national database for school exam items will be set up. Teachers who have developed exam items for optional subjects will be able to add these to the database. Schools can use these items for their school exams. The national database will not guarantee the quality of the exams, but it will stimulate the quality. It works somewhat like Wikipedia: anyone can complement and optimise previously developed material.
* An optional subject must always be developed in cooperation with an SSVE-course and (a) local employer(s).
* The importance of the optional subject for the school, the movement of students to continuing education, and the region will be recognised by local employers.
* The representative advisory council of the school has to be informed about the intention to develop an optional subject in advance, because it will determine the direction and character of the education that the schools offers in the region.

NB. As part of the implementation of the profiles in PVE, attention will be paid to the development of examples for schools which demonstrate how to arrive at an optimal arrangement of subjects.

* The optional subject – like the profile subjects – has to consist out of tasks and sub-tasks.

Further requirements are:

* It is clear what the student learns from the optional subject;
* and for what purpose;
* every (sub-)task requires a description of the knowledge and skills needed to properly carry out the task.

A request for registration of an optional subject will always be tested on basis of these criteria by a test committee.

NB An internship is a didactic procedure. As long as the tasks and sub-tasks are clear, an internship can be part of the optional subject. It should always be clearly stated what the student can learn from the subject. ‘Doing an internship’ on its own cannot be the purpose of the subject.

* An optional subject should always be a combination of theory and practice. A subject that consists of merely grammar and arithmetic is not sufficient.
* A regionally developed optional subject is not allowed to consist for more than 25% out of content from a profile subject. Overlap between the content of profile subjects and optional subjects will sometimes be inevitable. A product that is part of the profile subject could, for example, form the basis for further elaboration in the optional subject. The 25%-rule does not count if the optional subject is meant to attain ‘a higher level of execution’, which would be the case for an in-depth optional subject. However, the difference between the profile subject and the optional subject should be very clear. The rule as it is posed now will be evaluated in due course.
* The optional subject has to be developed for at least 100 full hours (120 periods of 50 minutes).
* If an optional subject is developed for several different learning pathways, the differences between the pathways with regards to content have to be clear. In concrete terms, this means that the form of submission and the format for the development of an optional subject contain a list on which the submitter can indicate whether a certain task or sub-task relates to the basic vocational, middle-management vocational and/or combined pathway.
* If an optional subject will result in an exemption from the subject in SSVE, the requirements from SSVE also weigh in the assessment of the optional subject.

**Quality check**

The perspective, preconditions, and starting points have resulted in the following proposal for a compact system of quality checks. Schools should anticipate a rapidly changing environment. Therefore, the bureaucracy that comes with the system of quality assurance should be minimised so that the process of introducing a new optional subject is quick and easy. This way, an initiative for a new optional subject can be realised in the next school year. The proposal is as follows:

1. There will be 1 period for submission at the beginning of each school year.
2. Submission takes place by filling out the ‘submission form optional subject’ (see submission form).
3. This form consists of the following:
   1. general information, like details of the contact person or other submitters: the SSVE-course, the centre for Agricultural education, or (the) regional employer(s).
   2. further information about the optional subject: its aim, significance for the region (demand) and relevance with regards to the movement of students to continuing education;
   3. a brief outline of the optional subject in tasks and sub-tasks, number of hours and (optionally) learning pathways and;
   4. The developers’ signatures.
4. The form is submitted to a committee, who either approves or disapproves of it. If approved, the new subject will be further elaborated using the format for optional subjects.
5. The elaborated format is submitted to a test committee consisting of: an employee of a relevant vocational platform, an employee of the SBB (cooperation between vocational education and the business community) and an employee of SLO.
6. The optional subject is tested by quality criteria.
7. In case of a positive result, the new optional subject gets a subject code and will be added to the national register for optional vocational subjects.

The procedure takes place according to the following cycle:

First semester

* Half September: annual period for submission, start of tests
* Half December: end of testing, DUO (department of the ministry of education) makes a subject code

Second semester

* May: publication of subject in the register
* August: students enrol in the new optional subject

NB. The quality criteria for optional vocation subjects and the process of quality assurance are documented in the ‘Regulation for quality assurance of optional subjects’ (working title).