



Strengthening quality culture in upper secondary vocational education (MBO) teacher teams: A practical guide

Contents

1 Background 3

2 What is quality culture? 5

3 A strong quality culture: 10 insights 7

4 Next steps 9

1 Background

A strong quality culture opens up numerous opportunities for schools and teacher teams to enhance the quality of their teaching. In addition to good quality assurance systems, institutions need a different strategy for improving the quality of their teaching. Strengthening the quality culture appears to fulfil this need.

Quality culture has recently also received more attention from:

- The Dutch Inspectorate of Education, which incorporated a standard on quality culture in its inspection framework that took effect in August 2017.
- The Quality Network for upper secondary vocational education (Dutch: MBO), where focus has shifted 'from systems to genes'.
- The NCP EQAVET, whose remit is to improve quality assurance in Dutch MBO education, has prioritised efforts to strengthen quality culture.

In its roadmap document (*Koers van het Kwaliteitsnetwerk mbo*), the MBO Quality Network states that it 'supports measures to strengthen teacher teams, among other things through ownership of teaching practice and providing active scope for professionalisation within teams'.

To foster such measures, education institutions will in future be expected to pay explicit attention to their quality culture. Consequently, one of the items that the MBO Quality Network Expertise Group worked on in 2016-2017 was to define the concept of 'quality culture' and its implications for the quality of teaching at individual institutions.

This publication, which is an initiative of the MBO Quality Network's Expertise Working Group in association with NCP EQAVET, brings together and summarises recent insights into the factors needed to strengthen quality culture. These insights have been collected from publications on topics related to quality culture, such as professional scope, professional learning culture, teacher team collaboration and hard and soft controls. The aim of this publication is to encourage readers to think about what they can do to strengthen quality culture in their schools or teams and thus improve the quality of their teaching. Administrators, teachers, managers and staff assistants can use the insights presented here to identify interventions that will enable them to strengthen their quality culture.

The following sources were used in compiling this publication:

- Several thematic reports published by the Inspectorate of Education and its 2016 and 2017 editions of the 'State of education' (*Staat van het Onderwijs*).
- Several anonymised institutional reports issued by the Inspectorate of Education in 2016.
- 'Assurance for education quality' (*De zorg voor onderwijskwaliteit*), report of the ECBO, 2016.
- 'The utilised and unutilised potential of MBO teams' (*Het (onbenutte) potentieel van mbo-teams*), report by the ECBO, 2016.
- 'Code of good governance for the MBO sector' (*Branchcode goed bestuur in het mbo*), report by the MBO Monitoring Committee, 2017.
- 'Quality culture and education quality' (*Kwaliteitscultuur en onderwijskwaliteit*), report by the NCP EQAVET, 2016.
- 'Quality in higher education: Balance in scope, rules and accountability' (*Kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs: Evenwicht in ruimte, regels en rekenschap*), report by the Inspectorate of Education, 2015.
- 'A different perspective on professional scope in education' (*Een ander perspectief op professionele ruimte in het onderwijs*), report by the Inspectorate of Education, 2016.

Below, we first clarify what is meant by the term 'quality culture' and how it relates to the quality assurance system, and then present ten insights regarding quality culture. This is followed by a summary of next steps for the near future. The appendices provide summaries of the publications used.

2 What is quality culture?

Quality culture refers to a particular mindset as regards quality and efforts to improve quality. It describes the accepted, unified and mostly tacit way in which a group (a team of teachers, a department or a school) strives to deliver quality in its teaching, as based on a set of underlying collective values and shared interpretations and conceptualisations. A quality culture is expressed in a group's language, standards and customary behaviours. In organisations and teacher teams there may in many cases be both an overarching culture and multiple subcultures¹.

Distinctions are sometimes drawn between a strong quality culture and one that is weak (e.g. Inspectorate of Education, 2015). A strong quality culture is founded on collective ownership of and systematic and structural efforts to improve the quality of education. It entails an attitude of willingness to learn and improve and to receive feedback, and mutual accountability for results. A weak quality culture is one in which individual commitment is optional and in which the major focus is on individual interests and views and on maintaining the status quo.

Groups that work together have a quality culture. Having evolved over the entire course of the group's collaboration, this culture is necessarily specific to that group and is characterised by specific strengths and pitfalls. This offers a neutral viewpoint for looking at a quality culture. The NCP EQAVET has formulated four 'snapshots' of such different quality cultures as characterised by their specific strengths and pitfalls.

A quality culture does not exist in isolation. It has to be underpinned by a quality assurance system and requires quality awareness and quality behaviour. The grid below illustrates how these four components interact to bring about improvements in education quality.

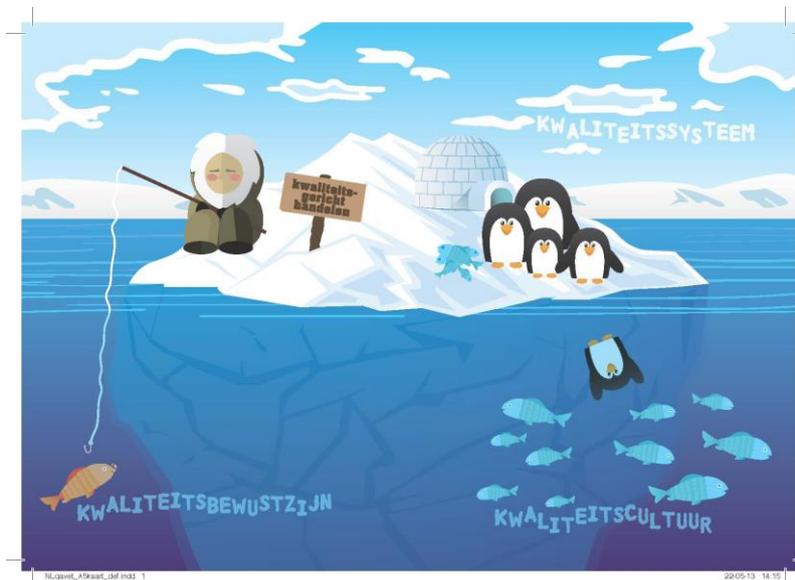


Figure 1. Grid showing the four components needed to strengthen quality.

This conceptualisation draws on the metaphor of an iceberg: the components above the water – a *quality assurance system* and *quality behaviour* – are visible. Those underwater – *quality culture* and *quality awareness* – are not visible. The components in the right quadrants of the grid concern the collective teacher team or organisation, whereas those on the left concern the individual. All

¹ Based on definitions applied by the Inspectorate of Education, 2015, and the NCP EQAVET, 2016. It should be noted that the latter publication is practical in orientation and did not seek to formulate a comprehensive definition of quality culture.

four quadrants are needed to achieve education quality. This grid therefore offers a useful means of identifying and monitoring what is needed to improve quality. Are interventions needed in the system, for example, or in the culture, or at the individual level? The insights provided in this publication set out what is needed to build a strong quality culture and thus improve education quality.

3 A strong quality culture: 10 insights

1. **Teacher teams are the linchpin of education quality.** Therefore, the management has to provide teacher teams with a clear task, based on a foundation of mutual dependence and reciprocity. Supervisors have to direct their team in the performance of that task. Leadership has to be keyed to educational practice, fit the team's task and respond to its needs.
2. **Teacher teams have to be guided by a clear-cut, shared and proven vision on teaching and learning.** This vision must be based on individual ambitions and objectives and developed in an open internal and external dialogue with students and other stakeholders. There should be a visible dialogue at and between all levels of the organisation and with all stakeholders (including about the implementation; see insight 3), characterised by sharing ideas, listening to others' ideas with an open mind, examining assumptions together and working together to articulate and clarify implicit and underlying thoughts. This dialogue ought to result in an enhanced understanding of one another's ideas, a sense of connection and a new coherent, shared framework. Views held at the organisational, group and individual levels must be harmonised in a climate of open exchange. This process should not be dictated by external signals or stimuli, such as inspection findings. The team can then flesh out this vision to align with its own imperatives, thereby enabling its members to carry out their shared educational task.
3. **Teacher teams have to be outward-looking and proactively solicit feedback.** Teacher teams have to be receptive to external input, including feedback from students, organisations and parents, and to developments within the profession. Just as when formulating a vision (insight 2) on how to provide a good education, there must be an open dialogue with internal and external stakeholders regarding how the team will implement it. Teacher teams must in any case involve students in the evaluation of education quality and when formulating proposed improvements. Teacher teams must be innovation-minded and flexible.
4. **Teacher teams, supervisors and administrators have to know how the quality of their teaching stacks up.** They need to have a clear, shared picture of the quality of their teaching, supported by objective data.
5. **The organisational structure has to facilitate teacher teams.** The institutional structure should promote teamwork and collaboration, delimit the scope of the team's activities and create the right conditions for it to function effectively within these limits. This means that interventions to strengthen quality culture are needed at both the team and organisational levels. Specific contributions and educational leadership are needed from various positions within the organisation, including administrators, directors, staff assistants and teachers. Respect for one another's roles, responsibilities and views is essential. This will enable the organisation to function as a single entity, driven by the sense that 'we are in it together' instead of 'us against them'. Where quality is concerned, everyone in the organisation has to speak the same language.
6. **The team's collective and individual learning capacity determines the focus of improvement.** The road to quality improvement is a learning process. Building a strong quality culture requires a change in attitude; it requires an increased awareness, achieved through reflection, that offers a different perspective on the existing situation. Completing this learning process takes motivation, time and an active willingness to learn with and from each

other, both as individuals and as a team, thus cultivating a learning culture. HRM policy has to be structured to promote and facilitate a quality culture.

7. **Interventions in the culture, or soft controls, have to be in balance with interventions in the structure or system, or hard controls.** Management has to apply a combination of hard and soft controls, striving for a balance in which these reinforce each other. Examples of soft controls are stakeholder involvement, administrators, directors and managers who set an example, internal and external dialogue, team ownership and administrator face time with teams. Examples of hard controls are imposing targets, conducting audits, systematically analysing data and working with improvement plans and annual plans. The need for both types of controls aligns with the idea that interventions are needed in all four quadrants of the grid.
8. **Quality improvement interventions vary according to the teacher team and situation.** The quality culture determines which interventions will work for a given team and which ones will not. Also important is the phase of the team's development and the extent to which it requires direction or is self-directing.
9. **Exemplary behaviour has to be visible at all levels.** A strong quality culture finds expression in the behaviours of stakeholders at every level. Administrators and supervisors should be role models in this respect, demonstrating in their daily conduct the types of behaviours they wish to see at each level in the organisation, and thereby setting an example. Prerequisites for this are a safe working environment in which employees demonstrate ownership, hold themselves and each other to account and have sufficient individual scope for action within the overarching parameters.
10. **Acknowledging successes is the starting point for further development.** Interventions have to be aimed at learning and improvement, not on judgement, control and accountability. The latter make an environment feel unsafe. When pursuing further development, the important thing is to start with the team's strengths.

4 Next steps

In this publication the MBO Quality Network and the NCP EQAVET present the latest insights on how to strengthen quality culture. It seeks to encourage administrators, teachers, managers and policy officers to think about which interventions they can implement to make these insights a part of daily practice, thereby building a stronger quality culture and thus improve their teaching.

The MBO Quality Network and the NCP EQAVET will continue these efforts, among other things by monitoring new research and published findings and testing them in practice, and by mapping out interventions that schools and teacher teams can implement. The NCP EQAVET is also working closely with the MBO Quality Network to design a 'team quality snapshot' tool to aid in building a strong quality culture.