



Easing legal and administrative obstacles in EU border regions

Case Study No. 11

Education

Language requirements preventing VET students from studying abroad

(Germany – Netherlands)



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Abstract

Language barriers preventing VET students from studying abroad

International mobility of trainees, students and teachers in vocational education is seen as a more and more important and even essential ingredient to vocational education. Mobility mainly covers two forms: mobility related to being educated and passing exams in another country and mobility related to internships and traineeships in other countries or foreign exchanges etc. At the European Union (EU) level, policy for vocational education and training (VET) focusses on the internationalisation of VET and the mobility of trainees, students and teachers in general (mainly by promoting work experience, internships, seminars, etc.); it does not specifically focus on cross-border mobility in border regions.

The specific obstacle examined here is the case of German students in secondary vocational education in the Dutch part of the German-Dutch border region, who have to pass exams in the Dutch language, according to Dutch law. This law hampers the cross-border mobility of students in secondary vocational education, which becomes especially apparent in border regions. This obstacle can be seen as an administrative barrier, because it arises from the language requirement found in the national law.

It would appear that this administrative language obstacle is especially apparent for German students in secondary vocational education who want to study in the Netherlands but not vice versa. Dutch students in secondary vocational education are less interested to receive education in Germany. In general, students in secondary vocational education are less interested in attending a school on the other side of border, because the radius that these young students (15 - 16 years old) can travel is limited. It is only in specific cases that these students are interested in a school on the other side of the border, for example if a specific course is not available in their own country, which is the case for some courses provided in the Netherlands but not available in Germany.

The European Commission (EC) cannot amend national law to resolve the specific barrier as Member States are responsible for their own education and training systems. These are entirely national competences and so the Dutch State legislates as it sees fit regarding which languages should be used. Furthermore, the Dutch government is not inclined to change the law on this specific aspect. To cope with the specific language requirement in national law, specific language courses are offered to students requiring it, although this does not seem sufficient in all cases (especially for the higher level courses of secondary vocational education).

The case study addresses the administrative language obstacle identified in the horticultural sector in the Venlo-Niederrhein region. In this case, the barrier in secondary vocational education appears to be strongly related to the integration of regional cross-border labour markets and regional cross-border economies. This integration is hampered by lack of knowledge of languages and cultures across the border. This is recognised by several institutions and several initiatives and good practices can be implemented to improve education of cross-border languages and cultures. In this context, three initiatives are presented in this case study: the GROS project, neighbouring language education and the learning Euregio.

1 Outline of the obstacle (legal and administrative) and the policy context

Language barriers and secondary vocational education¹

This case study focusses on an administrative language obstacle in relation to cross-border mobility of trainees, students and teachers in vocational education. This case is based on a barrier identified in the Venlo-Niederrhein region (Netherlands – Germany²). The specific obstacle identified is the case of German students following secondary vocational education in horticulture in the Dutch part of the region and have to take exams in Dutch according to Dutch law. This is stipulated in article 7.1.1 of the Adult and Vocational Education Act (Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs), which came into force in 1995. This rule hampers cross-border mobility of students in secondary vocational education (not only in the horticulture sector, but in secondary vocational education generally), which becomes especially apparent in border regions. In general, these students are 15 or 16 years old when they start their training. Vocational education and training (VET³) organisations in the Netherlands have raised the issue with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but the Ministry does not intend to change the law. Instead, in recent years, more attention has been paid to ensuring the Dutch language is taught in secondary vocational education in the Netherlands, because the level of Dutch amongst students in secondary vocational education is considered too low.

The obstacle under review can be seen as an administrative barrier because it arises from the language requirement found in national law. However, the obstacle can also be defined as a language barrier, because it is also a result of German students' insufficient knowledge of the language of their neighbouring country (in this case the Dutch language). Therefore, this case study examines language barriers, secondary vocational education, and cross-border mobility.

The situation for higher education is quite different, as there is a less strict legal provision regarding the need to hold examinations in Dutch. That being said, the characteristics of higher education are comparable to secondary vocational education on some points. Furthermore, there is a strong link between secondary vocational education and the labour market. The relevance of neighbouring languages in secondary vocational education therefore is also important for the regional (cross-border) labour markets.

1.1 Mobility of trainees, students and teachers in vocational education

The rationale of mobility

International mobility of trainees, students and teachers in vocational education is increasingly seen as an important and even essential ingredient of vocational education. Working abroad is considered to be the ideal way to acquire the international occupational competences needed for many jobs. The greatest benefits arise in areas which involve personal, social, language and professional skills, which

¹ Education systems differs a lot between countries. This case study focusses on secondary (following primary education) vocational (contrary to general education) education. For the specific Dutch situation this is concerned with students aged from about 16 to 20).

² Broek, J. van den and Smulders, H. (2013), The evolution of a cross-border regional innovation system: An institutional perspective, 2013, http://www.regionalstudies.org/uploads/Van_Den_Broek_Smulders.pdf (accessed in November 2016)

³ Vocational education and training (VET): education and training which aims to equip people with and training (VET) knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market (Source: Cedefop (2014). Terminology of European education and training policy: a selection of 130 key terms. (2nd edition). Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-andresources/publications/4117>.

are expected to improve future employment opportunities for those in vocational education.⁴

Different forms of mobility

In the context of this case study, mobility of trainees, students, and teachers mainly covers two forms of mobility:

- receiving education and passing exams in another country;
- internships and traineeships in other countries or foreign exchanges etc.

The opportunities and barriers differ for these two forms of mobility. Mobility in the sense of seeking education and passing exams in another country is generally related to receiving education for a period of several years at a foreign school. Mobility in the sense of internships and foreign exchanges generally relate to a shorter period and are seen mainly as an additional opportunity for following education courses abroad. The latter form of cross-border mobility seems to occur more in vocational education than the former. Experts interviewed indicate that compared to higher education, work stays abroad are limited in secondary vocational education.

Mobility in cross-border regions

The importance of international mobility is stronger in European border regions. As will be explained further in this case study, economies on both sides of the border are integrating to become cross-border regional economies, which includes the integration of labour markets. Therefore, cross-border mobility in education is even more important for students living and/or planning to live in these regions. Cross-border mobility in education is important for acquiring the knowledge and competences to deal with cross-border contacts and activities in their future jobs in the region. Furthermore, at a regional level, acquiring such knowledge and competences presumably also has wider economic benefits for the region, although clear evidence on this aspect seems to be lacking.

1.2 Outline of the obstacle (legal and administrative)

Mobility in secondary vocational education: less international

International mobility in higher education is already well developed. At the higher education level there are specific programmes to stimulate international mobility, there is cooperation between education institutions and there are international networks, etc. to facilitate international mobility of students. In addition, English is already a common language at higher education institutions. This means that there seem to be fewer language barriers hampering mobility in higher education. Furthermore, education systems in higher education are more aligned due to the implementation of the bachelor and master system.

This is quite different to the situations in secondary vocational education. Different education systems, including the use of different languages on both sides of a border (language barriers), form obstacles for cross-border mobility of students and teachers in secondary vocational education, especially in border regions.

⁴ Hübers, B. (2013), Learning abroad: Current status and prospects of cross-border mobility, BWP Vocational Training in Research and Practice, Special Edition 2013, <https://www.bibb.de/veroeffentlichungen/en/bwp/show/id/7049> (accessed in November 2016)

Box 1. *Obstacle N156 – Language barriers preventing VET students from studying abroad*

According to Dutch law, German students must pass exams in the Dutch language. This obstacle can be seen as an administrative barrier, because it arises from the language requirement found in the national law. These are entirely national competences Member States are responsible for their own education and training.

The specific obstacle examined here is the case of German students in secondary vocational education in the Dutch part of the German-Dutch border, specifically in the horticultural sector in the Venlo-Niederrhein region.

This administrative language obstacle is especially apparent for German students in secondary vocational education who want to study in the Netherlands but not vice versa. Dutch students in secondary vocational education are less interested to receive education in Germany

To cope with the specific language requirement in national law, specific language courses are offered to students requiring it, although this does not seem sufficient in all cases (especially for the higher level courses of secondary vocational education).

The case study addresses the administrative language obstacle identified in the horticultural sector which acts as a barrier in secondary vocational education in the cross-border region.

Different forms of mobility: varying degrees of barriers

The mobility of trainees, students and teachers comes in several forms. Firstly, there are traineeships or internships, where students or teachers work in enterprises or follow courses at educational institutions in other countries to gain international experience. Another form of mobility happens by following (long-term) education at an educational institute abroad and passing exams at that educational institution. In the case of cross-border traineeships or internships there are fewer obstacles. There might be some formal barriers due to differences in education systems and the language might be an obstacle. However, gaining some language experience during a cross-border traineeship or internship might be one of the objectives of the traineeship or internship. Furthermore, traineeships and internships in another country have been stimulated over the years (for example by Erasmus and Erasmus+), and they are often part of the course, especially in higher education.

This form of mobility is different when an individual follows education at an educational institution in another country, and passes exams at that educational institute. In these cases different education systems and different languages form the real obstacles for students to go to a school across the border, especially in secondary vocational education. In the period 2007-2013, one of the main reasons for this kind of mobility seem to be high unemployment in Germany, which meant that young people could not get a working contract in the business sector, and consequently could not follow secondary vocational study in Germany. Nowadays, the reason German students in secondary vocational education would go to a school on the Dutch side of the border is that certain specific courses are not available in Germany (nearby). It seems that this is not the case as much for Dutch students and German courses.

Language barriers and legal and administrative barriers are quite common in cross-border regions

In the public consultation of the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission (DG Regio) in 2015⁵, an inventory of obstacles in border

⁵ European Commission (2016), Overcoming obstacles in border regions: summary report on the online public consultation, 21 September-21 December 2015, 2016,

regions was made. In the field of education, 28% of the respondents indicated that there are language barriers and 53% mentioned legal and administrative barriers. The legal and administrative barriers in education were especially related to a lack of recognition of education and qualifications. Language barriers are seen as a cross-cutting obstacle for cross-border mobility in many areas, not only in the field of education.

Limited knowledge of neighbouring languages and cultures

According to some experts, in the past residents of border regions were more familiar with the language of neighbouring countries. They learned the neighbouring language through television and radio, and the neighbouring language was often taught in schools, as well. In the case of the German-Dutch border, in most Dutch schools students were taught the German language. According to some experts, nowadays this training can be followed voluntarily and fewer young people in the Netherlands are willing to learn German.

Furthermore, knowledge regarding neighbouring cultures (including business culture) is limited. For example, some experts pointed out that German enterprises are much more hierarchical than Dutch enterprises, leading to different attitudes within and between enterprises. This limited knowledge regarding cultural aspects is also an obstacle to cross-border mobility.

Strong links between labour market and vocational education

Secondary vocational education is very much linked to the regional labour markets and regional business sectors. Therefore, policies regarding education and policies regarding labour markets are also interrelated. Policies and initiatives for vocational education are linked to the needs of the labour markets. There is a significant level of cooperation between the business sector and vocational education institutes in order to promote a good, smooth transition from education to the businesses sector. This applies especially to (secondary) vocational education, as vocational education is more practical and focussed on the job requirements of enterprises. This is very relevant as regional economies and labour markets in border regions are integrating more and more and becoming cross-border regional economies and labour markets.

Recognition of diplomas

In higher education, foreign diplomas are more easily recognised due to the introduction of the bachelor and master system across the EU. In the Netherlands, there is a less stringent language restriction for passing exams in higher education according to the Higher Education and Research Act. In secondary vocational education, the recognition of vocational qualifications and how this ought to work is less evident. The qualifications might be recognised in theory, but in practice this has been shown to be more complicated. Vocational qualifications might differ between countries, and enterprises are not sufficiently familiar with the contents of vocational qualifications. This hampers the functioning of cross-border labour markets.

The factors mentioned in this section are strongly interrelated. This complicates weighting these factors and identifying which factor is most crucial.

1.3 The policy context

For the mobility of trainees, students and teachers in vocational education in border regions two fields of EU policies are relevant. First, policies in the field of education are relevant. The policy focus regarding VET is geared towards internationalisation of VET and the mobility of trainees, students and teachers in general; it is not specifically focussed on cross-border mobility in border regions. Secondly, policies focussing on

the development of cross-border regions are relevant. These regional policies are generally not specifically aimed at education or vocational education. Within this policy area, there are initiatives that are relevant for (vocational) education in border regions, but these policy initiatives focus on labour market initiatives in particular. The different types of policies have different rationales and different focusses. In the following paragraphs, attention will first be paid to national mobility initiatives, after which the two types of policies are briefly discussed. Although none of these policies and initiatives directly addresses the specific administrative language obstacle under consideration here, they are related to improving and facilitating opportunities for cross-border mobility in education and related labour markets in general.

National mobility schemes

A 2012 EC study made an inventory of national mobility schemes in education in Europe⁶. Most European countries have implemented schemes to facilitate and promote learning mobility. These refer, for example, to work placements, participation in courses or seminars, language classes, volunteering, work camps, school stays, youth exchanges and study tours. These schemes can also be broader and focus on more than just providing vocational education and training. The schemes mostly focus on international learning mobility within existing education courses, not on following complete education courses, or on passing exams abroad. Furthermore, most schemes are not primarily focussed on border regions.

Nevertheless, there are some policy initiatives which focus on mobility between neighbouring countries. In Germany, for example, there are quite a large number of bilateral mobility schemes with neighbouring countries such as France, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands, so as to overcome cultural barriers and stereotypes. Furthermore, there is much interest in this kind of mobility between Ireland and the UK/Northern Ireland, in the Scandinavian countries, and in Austria and the Netherlands. These initiatives do not specifically address the core administrative language obstacle of this study, but they help integration and cross-border cooperation which result in improved cross-border labour mobility, especially in border regions.

European Education policy

At the European level, the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) of the EC is responsible for education policy. The basic principle of the Commission is that each EU Member State is responsible for its own education and training systems. The EC has no mandate in the education and training policies of Member States. These are entirely national competences and so in this case, the Dutch state legislates as it sees fit concerning which languages are used in education. The Commission helps coordinate matters between countries, or helps Member States to share best practice.

European Vocational policy

For the EU, internationalisation of vocational education is an important topic. In the European economy a large proportion of enterprises are active in other Member States. They have international and European networks and need employees with international competences. Over the years, several EU policies have been developed related to mobility and/or vocational education. These policies are not specifically focused on cross-border mobility in border regions, but to some extent they are also relevant for border regions. Some of these policies are described here as an illustration.

⁶ ICON-Institute and CO KG Consulting Gruppe (2012), Study on Mobility Developments in School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Adult Education and Youth Exchanges, June 2012, https://www.jugendpolitikineuropa.de/downloads/4-20-3421/Mobility_Study_Final_Report.pdf (accessed in November 2016)

The Copenhagen Declaration of 29-30 November 2002 launched the European strategy for enhanced cooperation in VET, commonly referred to as the 'Copenhagen processes'. It stressed the need for a European dimension to education and training, and promoted mobility within vocational education and training.

The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 is a Communiqué of the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, to review the strategic approach and priorities of the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020. The Communiqué followed the Copenhagen process and took the principles and ideas of the Copenhagen process into account. The Communiqué states that the impact of the Copenhagen process on countries' VET policies has been both quick and strong. It also states that 'VET policies alone do not suffice to address socio-economic challenges and make mobility and lifelong learning a reality.' According to the Communiqué, VET policies require comprehensive approaches which link VET to other policies, in particular employment and social policies.

The Communiqué also stresses the importance of facilitating transnational mobility and substantially increases opportunities for transnational mobility of VET students and VET professionals.

Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020)

Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) is the main framework for cooperation in education and training. Funding is available through Erasmus+. One of the four common EU objectives of the ET 2020 is to address challenges in education and training systems by 2020, and to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality. One of the EU benchmarks set for 2020 is that at least 20% of higher education graduates, and 6% of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification will have spent some time studying or training abroad.

Instruments

For mobility of vocational education and training several instruments, programmes, and funding schemes have been available. These included PETRA II, the Leonardo da Vinci Programme, Erasmus and Erasmus+. Erasmus+ also includes opportunities for language learning for mobility. With respect to mobility, most of the programmes facilitated initiatives related to stays abroad, internships, foreign exchanges etc., and did not focus strongly on receiving education and passing exams abroad.

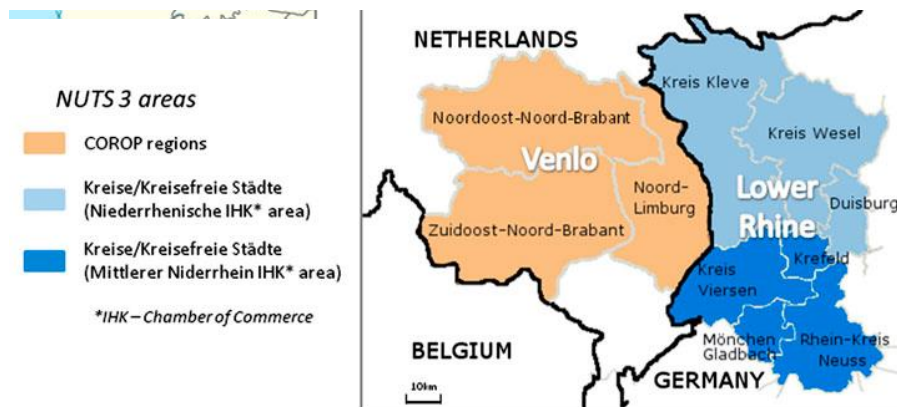
Regional policies

Within the EC, DG Regio is responsible for regional policies. One of the goals of the Commission cohesion policy is European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). This is better known as INTERREG. INTERREG provides a framework for joint initiatives of actors from different Member States. INTERREG started in 1990 with INTERREG I and the most recent INTERREG period runs from 2014-2020 (INTERREG V). The budget for INTERREG V is 10.1 billion euro. ETC is relevant for cross-border initiatives and within these, initiatives relating to the development of border regions have also been started. In section 1.5 of this case study some specific initiatives are described relating to education and labour market in the border regions of Germany and the Netherlands, and to secondary vocational education in particular, which are financed by INTERREG funds.

2 Case Study Context

The obstacle that forms the basis of this case study was identified in a study carried out in 2013 called 'The evolution of a cross-border regional innovation system: An institutional perspective'. This study⁷ focusses on the evolution of cross-border regional innovation systems and especially on the horticultural sector in the Venlo-Niederrhein region (Dutch-German border, see figure 1).

Figure 1. The Venlo-Niederrhein region



Source: Jos van den Broek & Huub Smulders, Institutional hindrances in cross-border regional innovation systems, In: *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 2015 Vol. 2, No. 1, 116–122.

In the study the following obstacle was mentioned: 'German students can study at a Dutch vocational training institute, but they need to have knowledge of the Dutch language comparable to Dutch students to pass exams. Vocational training institutes in the Netherlands are not allowed to take exams in other languages, in this specific case in German or English. This generally discourages German students (and students with other nationalities) from pursuing parts of the education in vocational training institutes in the Netherlands part of the region. In case of the Venlo-Niederrhein region (Euregio rhein-maas-nord), where horticulture is a key economic sector, this formal language requirement creates difficulties for institutes / schools specialised in vocational horticultural training.'

It seems that the administrative language obstacle is especially apparent for German students. This could be due to different school systems or language barriers, but it seems more likely that there are no incentives for these students to go abroad in combination with the limited radius of these young students.

2.1 Dutch Law: exams in vocational education in Dutch

According to Dutch law, in principle, exams in secondary vocational education have to be conducted in the Dutch language. This is stipulated in article 7.1.1 of the Adult and Vocational Education Act (*Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs*). As has been mentioned before, the EC has no mandate to intervene in national education systems, meaning that the EC cannot force the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to withdraw the language provision for secondary vocational education established in Dutch law.

2.2 Background

The mobility of students insofar as German students follow secondary vocational education in the Netherlands is strongly linked to regional labour market developments in combination with differences in secondary vocational education. In Germany, students in secondary vocational education must have an employment

⁷ Broek, J. van den and Smulders, H. (2013), The evolution of a cross-border regional innovation system: An institutional perspective, 2013, http://www.regionalstudies.org/uploads/Van_Den_Broek_Smulders.pdf (accessed in November 2016)

contract while they follow vocational education (dual system). In the Netherlands two possibilities exist, namely: full-time education in combination with internships (BOL), and working for an employer in combination with one day a week education at school (BBL)⁸. Around 2007-2013, when the above mentioned study was carried out, unemployment in Germany was high and consequently young people could not follow secondary vocational study in Germany. During that period, several German students in the border region went to schools in the Netherlands. At present (during the first half 2016), there is a shortage of labour in the German part of the region. Currently, therefore, German students can work and go to secondary vocational schools in Germany. Meanwhile fewer German students go to Dutch schools for their secondary vocational education. Nevertheless, the language provision in the Dutch law still forms an obstacle for German students to attend secondary vocational schools in the Netherlands. This is the case for specific courses not provided in German schools and for German students living close to the border and a Dutch school.

2.3 Coping with the language barrier

Some interviewees argued that in the period 2007-2013, many German young people crossed the border to attend secondary vocational education in the Netherlands. During this time it was relatively easy to cope with the obligation that exams should be conducted in Dutch. Some Dutch schools organised specific Dutch language courses for the German students before the start of the education period. That was enough for the students to attend the education. During the education period of 3 to 4 years, the language skills developed sufficiently for them to pass exams in the Dutch language. Nevertheless, other interviewees argued that this is only achievable for the lower level secondary vocational courses and not for the higher level secondary vocational courses. This can result in a situation where German students attend lower level courses at the Dutch schools or attend other courses (not the first choice) in German schools. Evidence on the extent of these possible impacts seems to be not available.

2.4 The radius of students of secondary vocational education is limited

In general students in secondary vocational education are 15 or 16 years old when they start their education and prefer a school near home. Students in higher education are more inclined to choose the best education, regardless of the distance from home. Generally, the radius of students in secondary vocational education is limited and the radius for finding a job after completion of their course is also limited. An interviewee questioned whether one should want students in secondary vocational education to go to a school on the other side of the border, when they can be educated in their own country and (with the right preparation) find a job across the border. In general, German students only go to Dutch secondary vocational schools when specific courses are not provided in German schools and when the German students are living close to the border, and to a Dutch school.

⁸ "BOL" stands for Beroepsopleidende leerweg and includes 70% education and 30% practice, while "BBL" stands for Beroepsbegeleidende leerweg and includes 20% education and 80% practice.

3 Impact analysis

3.1 Limited impact of the specific language barrier

No studies have been carried out on the impact of the language obstacle discussed in this case. The impact of the aforementioned language barrier of taking exams in Dutch in vocational education in the Netherlands seems to be limited. In the years that German students went to the Netherlands for secondary vocational education, this was in response to a specific situation. Unemployment in Germany was high and the students needed an employment contract in Germany to be able to attend secondary vocational education in Germany (dual system). In the Netherlands this was not necessary. One could say that the German students were to a certain extent compelled to cross the border to attend a Dutch secondary vocational school. In fact, the German students would have preferred to attend a school in the German part of the region. At present, the mobility amongst students in the region is limited due to the preferences of the students as well as linguistic and administrative barriers. It seemed to be relatively easy for students to cope with the language requirement to pass exams (in the lower level courses). Schools helped the students with a language course and according to some interviewees, passing the exams in Dutch was not a huge problem. Nevertheless, in specific cases, the language barrier is an obstacle for German students going to Dutch secondary vocational schools. However, no data is available on the number of students affected by this obstacle. According to experts, Dutch schools in secondary vocational education hardly attract any German students. An interviewee estimated that it might potentially be around 3% of the students, but this is difficult to substantiate with evidence.

3.2 Impact on students and on efficiency of schools

Another aspect mentioned in an interview is that the efficiency of schools might increase if more cross-border students were attracted. This might be the case especially in regions where the population is decreasing, and thereby also the number of students, leading to a negative impact on the efficiency of schools. Additionally, the point could also be raised of whether this really could be managed, given the limited interest amongst students to follow secondary vocational education across the border.

3.3 Importance of knowledge of neighbouring language and culture

Vocational education and regional labour markets are strongly interrelated and the competences which employers require from their employees are changing. Interviewees argue that knowledge of the neighbouring language and culture is increasingly important for employers, especially in border regions. Regional economies and regional labour markets do not end at country borders anymore. In border regions, employers do not only search for employees in their own country, but also cross-border employees. Furthermore, enterprises, especially in border regions, have both domestic customers and customers across borders. For example in the German-Dutch border regions, Germans citizens shop in the Netherlands and vice versa. Therefore, barriers to cross-border mobility do exist due to differences in languages and cultures, and can have an impact on regional economies and regional labour markets. However, there are no indications nor any studies found which illustrate and quantify the impact in this particular region.

3.4 Growing interest in neighbouring language and culture

In the past, young people in the Netherlands were familiar with the German language, especially in border regions. But interest in the German language has since decreased and less young people learn German at school. However, according to some interviewees, the interest in the neighbouring language and culture seems to have grown in recent years on both sides of the German-Dutch border. Students in vocational education have become aware of the importance of knowledge of the neighbouring language and culture for their employment opportunities on the (regional) labour market. When employers have the option to choose between

someone with and someone without knowledge of the neighbouring language and culture, they will often prefer the one with this knowledge. The increasing interest in the neighbouring language and culture comes along with increasing attention for incorporating education of the neighbouring language and culture in vocational education. There are several initiatives to introduce this in existing education trajectories (see below).

3.5 Labour markets in cross-border regions

Along the German-Dutch border, the characteristics of regional labour markets differ due to different characteristics of the regional economies and regional developments. As described, the economy of the Venlo-Niederrhein region (Netherlands – Germany) has a strong focus on the horticulture economy. Therefore, the regional labour market focusses on workers in the horticulture sector; this is not the case in other regions along the German-Dutch border. Furthermore, there are differences in the development of border regions that impact to the labour market. The Nijmegen region is a core economic region while other Dutch regions along the German border are so-called shrinking regions. The population in these regions is decreasing, which could lead to shortages on the regional labour markets on the Dutch side of the border. People on the German side of the border could fill these shortages on the Dutch side, and vice versa. Another aspect is population density: in some regions along the border the population density on one side of the border is limited, such as German border region near the Dutch Enschede region. In these regions there is a less strong cross-border labour market.

3.6 Importance of labour markets for innovation

The example of the language barrier outlined in this case was derived from a study on regional innovation systems.⁹ In this study, the authors argued that a well-functioning regional labour market plays an important role in regional innovation systems. They saw the labour market as a generator of knowledge flows since a regional cross-border labour market facilitates cross-border knowledge flows by employees and by students. Therefore, barriers in the cross-border labour market might have a negative impact on the development of innovations.

3.7 Need of knowledge of diplomas on the other side of the border for the functioning of labour markets

An important barrier for the cross-border regional labour market is the lack of knowledge of employers about the content and quality of the diplomas across the border. Some interviewees mention that diplomas for secondary vocational education are not recognised between Germany and the Netherlands. Others indicate that qualifications are recognised in principle because of the EU Directive on the recognition of diplomas. The interviewees agree that employers do not have enough knowledge of the diplomas of secondary vocational education systems across the border. Therefore, employers hire people from their own country, who may not have the best qualifications for the job. This lack of knowledge regarding the qualifications of diplomas across the border might hamper the functioning of the regional labour market.

⁹ Broek, J. van den and Smulders, H. (2013), The evolution of a cross-border regional innovation system: An institutional perspective, 2013, http://www.regionalstudies.org/uploads/Van_Den_Broek_Smulders.pdf (accessed in November 2016)

4 Solutions and good practice

In principle, it was concluded that the language barrier created by having to take exams in Dutch in secondary vocational education was limited. To a large extent this is because students in secondary vocational education are not as inclined to attend a school located across the border. Additionally, in practice, the solution for lower level courses was solved in a relatively straightforward manner through language support. Nevertheless, the language provision in the Dutch law still exists and forms a serious obstacle for German students wishing to follow (higher level) courses at Dutch secondary vocational schools (though no studies are available on the number of students affected by this obstacle). Furthermore, attention for skills regarding a neighbouring country's language and culture in secondary vocational education are essential for facilitating cross-border mobility on the regional labour markets in border regions.

It appears that the only way to remove the administrative language barrier is to adapt the law in the Netherlands. VET organisations in the Netherlands have already raised the issue with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but the ministry does not intend to change the law. On the contrary, in the Netherlands in recent years, more attention is being paid towards the Dutch language in secondary vocational education as the level of Dutch language amongst students in secondary vocational education was considered too low. Furthermore, removing the administrative language barrier from the law might lead to the rise of a new barrier, such as insufficient knowledge of the German language amongst Dutch teachers to conduct exams in German.

Since the simple solution of removing the language provision in the law does not seem realistic in the short-run, alternate solutions for coping with the language barrier are considered. This section discusses some of the relevant initiatives for reducing or breaking down barriers (especially language barriers) to the mobility of individuals in secondary vocational education and labour markets in the German-Dutch border region. In this context three relevant initiatives are presented here:

- The GROS project
- Neighbouring language education (Buurtaalonderwijs)
- The learning Euregio (Ler(n)ende Euregio)

Besides these projects there are several (smaller) initiatives in border regions. Most initiatives, including the projects elaborated below, arise from the need to prepare students in border regions for the more integrated cross-border regional economies and regional labour markets they will encounter in seeking employment and working.

In the public consultation hosted by DG Regio¹⁰, several potential solutions for obstacles in border regions were mentioned. Regarding legal and administrative barriers, respondents mentioned solutions such as encouraging more convergence in regulatory frameworks or arrangements, and more flexibility and mutual agreements. In relation to more flexibility and mutual agreements the suggestion was made to 'free' border regions from national legislation, adapting legislation to regional conditions, or conducting projects outside the national regulatory frameworks. In this case study such initiatives were not encountered, although at the level of the schools there is much cross-border cooperation. For the language barriers, more financial support for training and life-long learning of languages was suggested during the consultation, through for example, more language learning in schools or in educational systems more broadly. Cross-border bilingual schools could be promoted and programmes to learn the language of the neighbouring region could be further

¹⁰ European Commission (2016), Overcoming obstacles in border regions: summary report on the online public consultation, 21 September-21 December 2015, 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/consultation/overcoming-obstacles-border-regions/results/report_reg-16-006_en.pdf (accessed in November 2016)

developed and implemented in border regions. A respondent in the consultation suggested that learning the language of the immediate neighbour should be compulsory in all schools in border regions. Furthermore the following ideas were mentioned during the consultation as possible solutions to tackle language barriers: language exchange programmes, language learning alongside developing an interest in neighbouring countries and communication around the benefits of learning the language. A minority suggested using a third language (such as English) in border regions, but there are mixed feelings about this idea amongst the other experts consulted for this study.

As a follow-up to the consultation, the House of the Dutch Provinces (Huis van de Nederlandse Provincies) organised a seminar on cross-border cooperation (Samenwerken over grenzen heen)¹¹. During this seminar the Governor of Limburg, Theo Bovens acknowledged that the knowledge of the languages of neighbouring countries was decreasing. In response, he proposed to structurally incorporate education on neighbouring languages into the programmes for primary and vocational education systems. Since this was a very recent seminar it is not known yet whether there will be a follow-up, or whether this suggestion will be taken up by relevant parties.

4.1 Realism of breaking down the language barrier

A question encountered by interviewees in this case study is whether barriers should be and can be broken down, or whether relevant parties must simply cope with them. Several interviewees argued that breaking down these types of barriers is very complicated as the initiative to do so lies with the national governments. National governments however, are reluctant to change national laws to resolve specific bottlenecks in border regions. This is especially the case when countries have more neighbouring countries and consequently more bottlenecks between borders. Concerning the Dutch legal obligation to conduct exams in secondary vocational education in the Dutch language, the only solution is to change the national law. In the case of secondary vocational education this could imply that the law would have to be changed for a relatively small number of students. Therefore, interviewees argued that one should not focus on breaking down the barriers, but on finding solutions to cope with the barrier instead. Organising language courses for foreign students is a much easier solution to reducing the language barrier compared to changing the law.

4.2 The GROS project

The INTERREG IV A-Project 'GROS Impuls A&O', in short the GROS project¹² (Impulse labour market and education) is an initiative to engage in regional cross-border labour market and education activities with the aim of strengthening the economy in cross-border regions. As described, there is a strong link between regional business communities, regional labour markets and regional education (especially vocational education). In an inventory within the project, several obstacles have been identified, including language.

To address the language obstacle, the GROS project focussed on strengthening the education in schools regarding neighbouring languages. Talenacademie Nederland (Language Academy Netherlands), made an inventory of (practical) recommendations for projects along the German-Dutch border to strengthen education of neighbouring languages¹³. Knowledge of languages includes inter-cultural competences, and it is

¹¹ HNP seminar (2016), Samenwerken over grenzen heen: summary, March 2016, <http://link.mc1.nl/PQFkmm192Vr21rbzX885> (accessed in November 2016)

¹² EUREGIO (2013), Afgerond project "GROS Impuls A&O", 2013, http://www.euregio.eu/nl/Project_GROImpuls_A_O (accessed in November 2016)

¹³ Talenacademie Nederland (2015), Als we elkaars taal spreken ... Versterking buurtalenonderwijs in de 4 Duits-Nederlandse Euregio's, in kader van het INTERREG IV A-project 'GROS Impuls Arbeidsmarkt en Onderwijs', January 2015,

recommended that it should be possible to create continuous learning of a neighbouring language, starting in primary education, continuing into secondary and vocational education. Education institutions should be the main actors in strengthening the education of neighbouring languages. However, provinces, municipalities, and EU regions can also help stimulate solutions. These stakeholders have contacts and networks and can establish connections between schools and labour markets in specific regions. The GROS project focusses especially on identifying barriers and possible solutions, not on carrying out specific activities. The relevant parties should now use the recommendations and translate these into specific initiatives.

4.3 Neighbouring language education (Buurtaalonderwijs)

Other initiatives to strengthen the education of neighbouring languages in border regions are in place as well (see for example www.buurtalenlimburg.eu). The Province of Limburg for example, in cooperation with several border municipalities in the region, has developed specific activities in the context of this initiative. These actions are not only focussed on vocational education, but also on primary education. They are not only concerned with the neighbouring language, but also with the neighbouring culture. According to interviewees, including education of neighbouring languages in schools in cross-border regions is increasing on both sides of the German-Dutch border. Although data, evidence and studies on current state of affairs and the progress seem to be not available.

4.4 Ler(n)ende Euregio

The Ler(n)ende Euregio (Learning Euregio) is a network of schools in secondary vocational education in Germany and in the Netherlands in the Rhine Waal region, representing around 180,000 students and 10,000 teachers. The activities of the Ler(n)ende Euregio focus on the 'Euregional' education of students, meaning that they introduce students to the professional culture, language, and education system of the neighbouring region. The ultimate goal is to enlarge the labour market for the students in their own country as well as across the border, and to provide enterprises on both sides of the border with a better 'Euregional' skilled workforce. This is achieved through the exchange of information and cooperation projects in the border region. The activities are especially focussed on the economy and education in the Rhine Waal region. The following two main projects will be discussed here:

- Neighbouring language in secondary vocational education;
- Authorised descriptions of diplomas of secondary vocational education.

4.5 Neighbouring language in secondary vocational education

Several initiatives have been set up to integrate education in the language and culture of the neighbouring region. Foreign exchanges for students are organised for example, meeting days for representatives of the business community (one or more days) to meet and get to know each other better are set up, and Dutch and German schools and companies work together to develop material for the 'Euregional' vocational education programmes. Students receive a 'Euregional' certificate for participating and some 1,000 certificates have already been awarded to students. Furthermore, on the Dutch side of the border the project 'German in secondary vocational education' has been set up in collaboration with the Goethe Institute. There is a lot of interest among students for this initiative and students that have followed this course receive an extra certificate. However, the strong interest does lead to a shortage of teachers of the German language. In Germany, similar developments emerge: more and more secondary vocational schools offer education in Dutch as an option, and there is a strong interest among the German students as well. This leads to a shortage of teachers of the Dutch language in Germany, as well.

<http://www.euregio.eu/sites/default/files/downloads/Buurtaalonderwijs%20Studie.pdf> (accessed in November 2016)

4.6 Authorised descriptions of diplomas of secondary vocational education

As mentioned in this case study, an obstacle on the cross-border labour market is the lack of knowledge among employers about the quality of diplomas of secondary vocational education across the border. This hampers the proper functioning of regional cross-border labour markets and hinders the employment opportunities of the graduates. In order to tackle this barrier within the Ler(n)ende Euregio, authorised descriptions are made of diplomas of secondary vocational education trajectories on both sides of the border. This is done to improve cross-border transparency and the acceptance of the diplomas. The descriptions are drawn up by scientists at the Research Centre Vocational Education and Labour Market (CBA) in collaboration with the project management of the Ler(n)ende Euroregion, by Niederrheinische IHK Duisburg, and by knowledge institutes of relevant industries.

4.7 Expanding activities in the new INTERREG V period

In the meantime, a grant from the INTERREG V programme has been awarded for a new period which enables the Ler(n)ende Euregio to continue its activities. Future activities will include the expansion of the authorised descriptions with other professions and the creation of apps with profession specific terms in German and in Dutch. In the new period, more attention will be paid to neighbouring language education. Furthermore, the activities will be expanded to other regions along the German Dutch border in order to create a learning community along the whole German Dutch border.

4.8 Impact of the activities are not yet measured

The results of the Ler(n)ende Euregio have not (yet) been measured and would also be difficult to estimate. There are currently no evaluations available. Some of the interviewees are enthusiastic about the Ler(n)ende Euregio. Furthermore, other regions along the German-Dutch border use the results of the Ler(n)ende Euregio as well, such as the authorised descriptions of vocational education courses. Other border regions in Europe are interested in the activities of the Ler(n)ende Euregio, too. Therefore, one might conclude that the activities of the Ler(n)ende Euregio meet certain needs in border regions in the area of improving cross-border secondary vocational education and related cross-border labour markets.

For the new INTERREG V period, the Ler(n)ende Euroregion also intends to monitor the results of the activities. The organisation has already contacted a research institute to monitor the results, and in the near future this institute has planned to conduct a baseline study. The monitoring is focussed on whether the results of the activities meet the needs of employers.

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List of consultees

The case study started with studying the source where the barrier was found (Broek, J. van den, and Smulders, H., *The evolution of a cross-border regional innovation system: An institutional perspective*, 2013). Furthermore, internet search was carried out to find more relevant information. This involved European, national en regional websites (such as governments, cross-border organisations, schools, organisations of schools, etc.) The next step was to contact the auteur of this source, Jos van den Broek. First an appointment was made for a telephonic interview. This appointment was confirmed by email. In this email the objectives of the case study were explained, the main questions where included and relevant potential interviewees were asked. In the telephonic interview the barrier was discussed. Furthermore an email was received with contact details of potential interviewees. With the collected information and references this process was repeated several times (snowball method): looking for relevant websites and documents (see annex: List of references) and telephonic interviews with stakeholders (discussing the subject and asking for relevant interviewees). An important objective of the method was to collect information and views from different angles to achieve balanced results. Therefore interviews were carried out among representatives of several organisations, such as: researchers, representatives of schools, representatives of organisations of schools, representatives of regional (cross-border) organisations and representatives of the European Commission. The following persons were interviewed:

Jos van den Broek, ERAC

Mariska van der Giessen, Fontys

Paul Gehlen, Citaverde college

Hans Blankestijn, Before AOC Raad

Hans-Joachim Kaufmann, INTERREG Germany Netherlands

Lambert Teerling, Ler(n)ende Euregio

Wilfrie Koekkoek, Ler(n)ende Euregio and ROC Nijmegen

Paul Tzimas, European Commission DG Education & culture (EAC)

Felix Rohn, European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (EMPL)

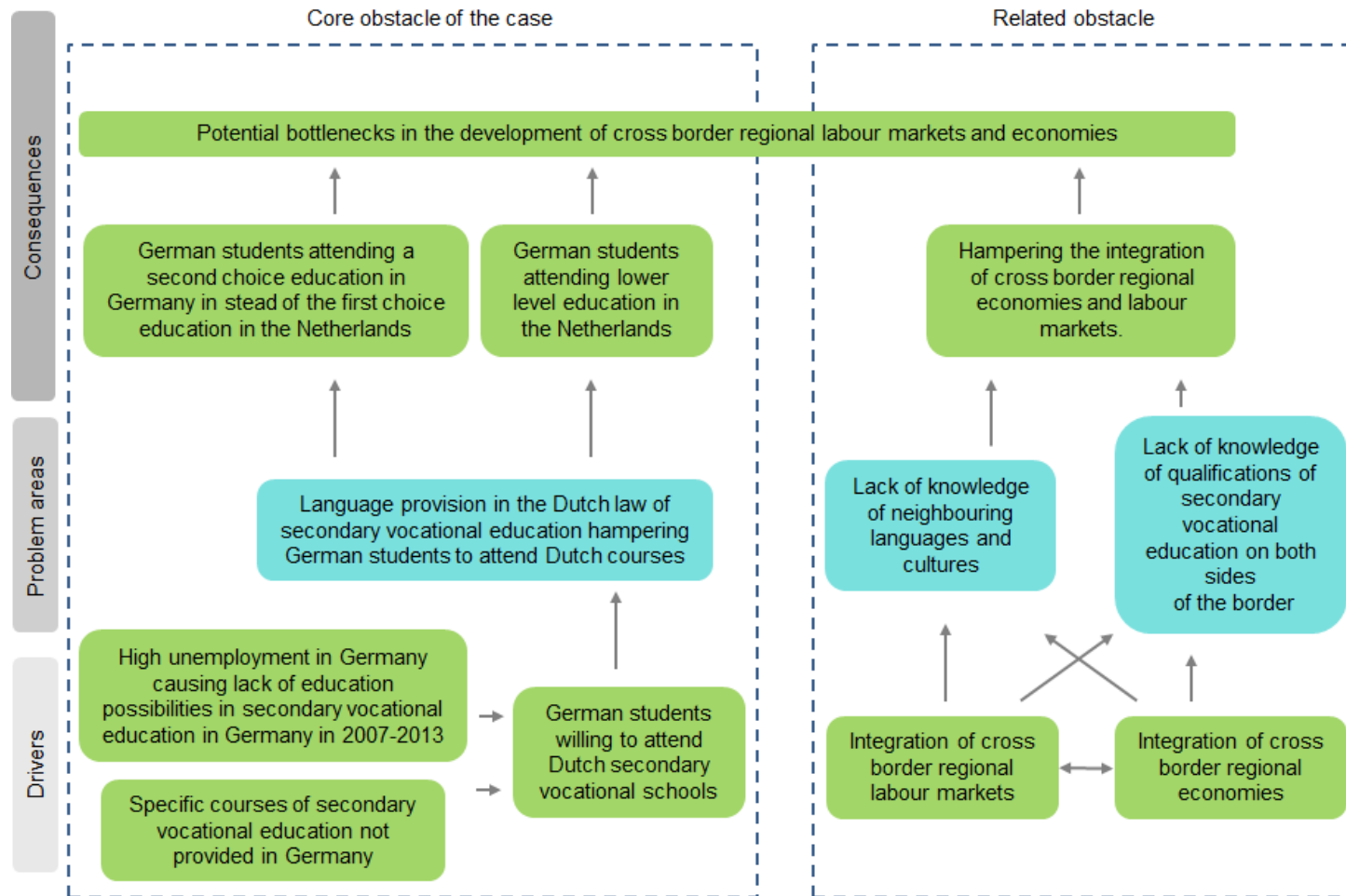
Peter Paul Knol, INTERREG Germany Netherlands

Heidi de Ruiter, INTERREG Germany Netherlands

Fred van Koot, Skills Netherlands

Annex

Figure 2. Problem tree



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