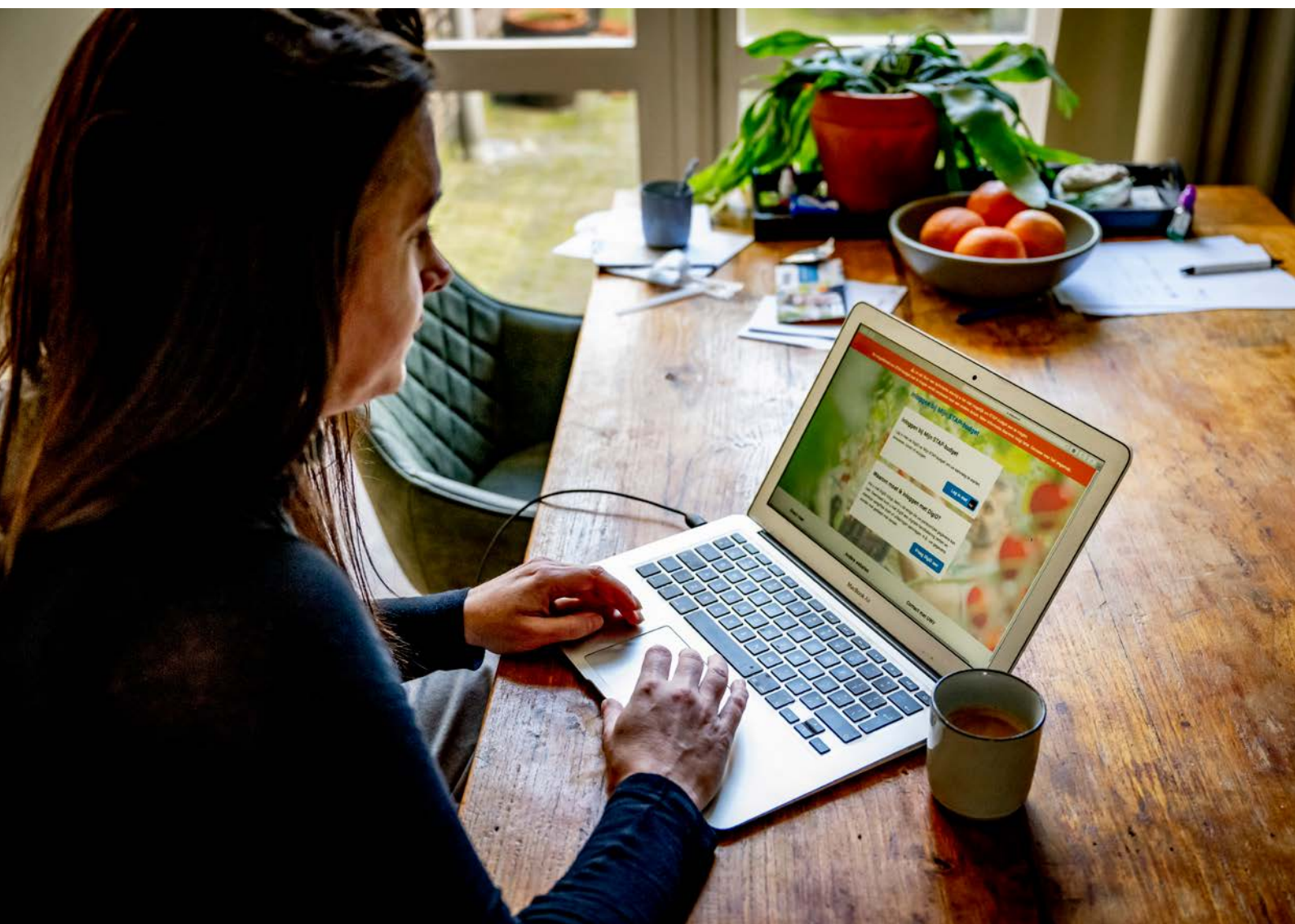




Summary

Self-direction or a sustainable job market?

Policy and citizen perspectives on lifelong learning



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Self-direction or a sustainable job market?

Policy and citizen perspectives on lifelong learning

original title

Eigen regie of een duurzame arbeidsmarkt?

Beleids- en burgervisies op een leven lang ontwikkelen

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Summary

Introduction

The government can examine the division of responsibilities for societal problems from a few different perspectives. For example, we saw that the government has shifted a lot of responsibilities to other parties in society, such as citizens and businesses, over the past few decades (Blijleven and Kooiker 2022; Veldheer et al. 2012). The way in which the government sees its own role and that of others plays an important role in what is also called the government's public governance paradigm: a more or less coherent set of norms and ideas on how the public sector should be managed, organised and led (Torfing et al. 2020: 9). This view on the division of responsibilities is usually subconscious, and can vary from believing in the need for a strong and regulatory government, to government that leaves things alone and gives other parties in society responsibility, such as citizens ('participation society') or businesses (for example, by opting to leave things to the free market). The government's public governance paradigm changes over time and depending on the societal problem, but elements from different public governance paradigms are also combined within domain-specific policies (Blijleven and Kooiker 2022). Public governance paradigms can have significant consequences for citizens, as they form the foundation for many policy choices. Just like the so-called 'conceptions of citizens' behind policy, the management policy is rarely made explicit. Making such philosophies explicit allows for reflection and assessment, in order to arrive at better policy.

In this report we examine, for the lifelong learning (LLL) policy domain, which management philosophies can be identified in current policy and to what extent these match the visions and preferences of citizens. A second report also examines the sustainability policy domain (Muiderman and De Kluzenaar 2024). Using data from another study, we also reflect on the connection between policy views and the views of citizens. A substantial difference between the perspectives of citizens and the government can be a sign that the government is insufficiently responsive. This can affect the legitimacy and efficacy of policy (see also Wagemans and Peters 2023). But there can also be reasons from a societal perspective to critically examine the dominant public governance paradigm, even when citizens and the government are aligned. For example, because a party has been assigned responsibility that it is not equipped to carry out. There are indicators that both the government and citizens themselves overestimate the capabilities of citizens (RVS 2017; Wagemans and Peters 2023; WRR 2017). For years, research in the social domain has shown that citizens are expected to be self-sufficient, while particularly citizens in vulnerable positions are limited in their capabilities, and citizens still often look to the government (Kromhout et al. 2020). Such tensions between policy and policy visions, citizens' visions and the approach to societal problems can undermine the efficacy and legitimacy of a public governance paradigm.

This report focuses on policy for lifelong learning. Recent governments have particularly targeted LLL because this, in their opinion, is needed to create and maintain flexibility and resilience in the Dutch economy. Significant developments such as technological advancements and globalisation are causing the duties and demands of paid work to change. Sectors are disappearing while other sectors are popping up, for example as a result of a shift from fossil fuels to sustainable energy sources. According to the government, this requires a labour force that is constantly retraining and getting additional training, and it also demands the efforts of citizens, businesses and the government. This report shows that these societal goals are not aligned with the policy approach and the visions and behaviour of citizens and policy, and it formulates points of attention for policy to improve this connection.

Box S.1 Primary message of this study

The LLL policy is firmly based on the assumption that citizens want to have and take control, and that the needs of individual employees and employers are aligned with the broader goal of LLL policy: a labour market in which employees are retraining when the dynamics of the labour market demand it. The division of responsibilities desired by citizens is fairly well matched with the current policy. However, we find that there is potential tension between the primary policy goal and the current execution of the LLL policy. If the primary goal is self-direction of one's career, the current mix of governance paradigms is fitting, as the current policy offers both employees and employers a lot of freedom. But if the primary goal of the LLL policy is aimed at results at a societal level (a sustainable labour market), a re-evaluation of the public governance paradigm is needed. Research has shown that employees and employers sometimes have goals that are at odds with collective goals, such as combating a tight labour market and stimulating an increase in sustainability. For example, it is not always in an employer's interest to retrain employees, particularly in the case of temporary employees. And the employees may not feel a sense of urgency until the moment their job is actually jeopardised. This means that, if the government primarily wants to use the LLL policy to improve the labour market and meet goals at the societal level, this will require more guidance from the government.

The policy vision: focus on personal control and responsibility for citizens and employers

We can identify multiple management philosophies in the division of responsibilities envisioned in the LLL policy, pertaining to how the public sector should be managed, organised and led. Elements of New Public Management and Network Governance are dominant. There is an emphasis on the responsibilities of citizens: the government expects them to constantly increase their chances of remaining employed by investing in their development. The assumption is that the sum of these individual choices will translate into a stronger and more flexible labour market at the societal level. The government does not force citizens to take this responsibility, but focuses on gentle encouragement. It does this by taking away barriers (such as by stimulating the offer of flexible education), by informing citizens about education and labour market opportunities and by pointing out the importance of development. Citizens are free to choose their education; the government does not offer much guidance on sectors with significant labour shortages. Self-direction and autonomy are core values of the policy.

According to the government, employers are, just like citizens, responsible for the employability of their employees. The government believes that employers have a facilitating and stimulating role, and should contribute to a learning culture in which learning and development are self-evident. Just like with citizens, the expectation is that it is in employers' own interest to fulfil this role, and that if employers are aware of the advantages and able to invest in development, they will actually do this. The focus is still on gentle encouragement, through subsidies, knowledge sharing and informational campaigns. And, just as with citizens, the choice is still with the employer.

The government makes itself responsible for creating the preconditions for citizens and employers to create the opportunities for lifelong learning, but does not take a strong guiding role in the collective interest.

The visions of citizens are closely aligned with current policy

The division of responsibilities desired by citizens is fairly well matched with the current policy. Both citizens and policy envision an emphasis on the roles of employers and citizens, while minimising the role of the government. The government wants to keep LLL voluntary, and citizens do not want to be forced to attend additional training. Citizens primarily want the government to support, finance and inform. Particularly the desire for financial stimulation is a point of focus, now that the government announced in the 2023 Spring Memorandum that it intends to abolish the STAP budget for training and development. Within the ministries involved, possibilities for other forms of financial support for LLL are currently being examined (Rijksoverheid 2023a, 2023b).

Reconsiderations for the future from a broader citizen's perspective

Our policy analysis shows that the LLL policy of recent years was primarily focused on the autonomy and freedom of choice of employers and employees. If we compare this vision with the visions of citizens and the broader knowledge on citizens and employers, there are a number of points for attention for the forthcoming government term.

1 Consider more government control for collective interests

The current LLL policy assumes that as long as citizens are informed about labour market opportunities and sectors that society needs, they will want and be able to develop in that direction. Individual and rational choices by citizens will then, according to the government, lead to positive outcomes for the collective interest. However, this is not always the case. For the next government term, we recommend focusing on prioritisation in the goals of the LLL policy. If the primary goal is giving citizens and employers autonomy and the ability to decide what development is useful and relevant from their perspective, the policy does not need to be adjusted. But if the government primarily wants to use LLL policy to deal with major societal issues, such as tightness in the labour market in specific crucial sectors or sustainability, they will need to take more control. Nationally, steps have already been taken to focus more on labour market relevance, such as with a retraining scheme aimed at IT and technology, and the Stagefonds Zorg subsidy. However, the Court of Audit was critical of the effect of this policy (AR 2023a, 2023b), because the schemes turned out to be too obscure or unappealing. More focus on LLL could mean that the role of different education providers may be reconsidered. Currently, private providers are a major player. Experiences with the STAP budget have shown that this creates perverse incentives, and public funding is not being used to the benefit of society. The government could consider giving regular education a bigger role. This underlines the importance of dialogue on the social tasks of public education: does its responsibility end when students receive their diploma, or should they be supporting Dutch citizens throughout their whole career?

2 Aligning LLL policy with the daily life of citizens

The current policy focuses on supporting the realisation of LLL, but primarily does this within the context of work, such as by focusing on a stimulating learning culture. However, retraining and additional training may not always be in the employer's interest. An employer in the fossil fuel sector is not particularly interested in retraining employees in the field of sustainability, and investing in temporary employees only pays off to a limited extent. In line with the advice of the Committee on the Regulation of Work (Commissie-Reguleren van Werk 2020), it seems sensible to ensure that workers on flexible employment contracts have the same opportunities for retraining and additional training. But the situation outside of work also matters. Caregiving and other responsibilities leave little time, energy and attention for education. The government is currently stimulating flexible education, but there is room for improvement. This could include expanding the stimulation of combined training and work programmes at new employers, offering leave opportunities for education (as in Finland; SER 2016), childcare at educational institutions and support for informal care.

3 Extra attention for vulnerable groups on the labour market

Particularly people with just a primary school/pre-vocational secondary education/senior vocational secondary education,¹ people on flexible employment contracts and people over the age of 55 are vulnerable on the labour market. Employees in jobs with a high chance of becoming automated are less focused on retraining than people in jobs with less chance of becoming automated. The LLL policy tries to focus on increasing the chances of vulnerable workers. However, in practice this is difficult. The Netherlands Court of Audit stated that in 2023, only 10% of those receiving the STAP budget only have a primary school/pre-vocational secondary education/senior vocational secondary education, while this is 23% of the population (AR 2023c). This share is larger than was the case for the previous scheme (the fiscal training allowance), so it is a step in the right direction, but it remains a low share. In order to address

¹ The Court of Audit (Algemene Rekenkamer) uses the term 'low-educated' in the report. This included: primary school education, lower secondary level education, pre-vocational secondary education and senior vocational secondary education.

target groups who are vulnerable on the labour market, it is therefore important that the government has insight into the reasons why these target groups do or do not participate in LLL and addresses these, particularly by looking for ways to make LLL achievable in practice in daily life.

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