

## INTERVIEW WITH MAURIJN ODÉ: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) IN DRIVING THE CIRCULAR TRANSITION

Duco de Mol van Otterloo and Apoorva Valli Shankar from the Circular Jobs Initiative team at Circular Economy spoke to **Maurijn Odé from the Circular Regional Economy (CRE) at ROC van Flevoland**, to explore the role of vocational education and training (VET) in driving the circular transition.

Maurijn Odé is an experienced teacher with a demonstrated history of working in the education management industry. As a project leader at the CRE at ROC van Flevoland, he provides direct links between research and its in-practice application, by applying methods of practice-based professional learning.

The CRE platform is affiliated with VET College Lelystad, part of the ROC of Flevoland. The ROC of Flevoland offers more than 130 training courses. Secondary vocational education is given at three different VET colleges in Almere Buiten, Almere Poort and Lelystad. The courses are given as a full-time Vocational Training Pathway (BOL) and/or as a part-time Vocational Training Pathway (BBL).

The CRE stands for connection, innovation and knowledge sharing. In collaboration with the universities of applied sciences in Almere, the business community and local governments, it has developed a continuous CRE curriculum. This learning track aims to give circularity a prominent role in all grades of VET education, as is already the case at many universities of applied sciences.

During the interview with Maurijn, the key aim was to explore the untapped potential of VET and the opportunities it could unlock for the circular transition. Some of the key takeaways from the interview with Maurijn were:

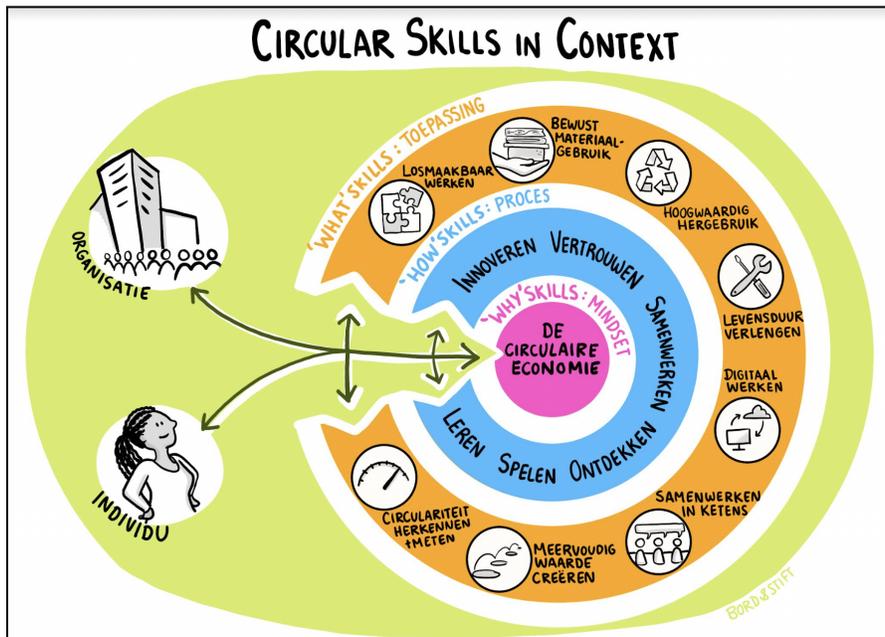
1. It is key to focus on challenge-based learning—not only in VET, but across education so that students work collaboratively with companies to solve practical challenges, enabling a two-way sharing and learning process. The PRICE (Practice & Innovation Center Circular Economy) initiative is an example of a practical action lab that brings together entrepreneurs, businesses, students, teachers and municipalities to work collaboratively to solve challenges. Cooperation between the triple helix (education, industry and government) is key.
2. It is key for educators and businesses within regions to work collaboratively. We don't always need to look for global solutions: answers lie in the way we work within regions. Within regions, there are many existing networks that can be leveraged to create connections, while interdependencies make the collaboration process more powerful.
3. HR has an important role to play in the circular transition. If an organisation's HR team sees the value of attracting and retaining people with circular competencies, they will need to proactively upskill employees and promote a culture of learning.
4. Even if no attempt is made to change the negative stigma associated with VET, this stigma is likely to change: there is a shortage of workers with these specialised skills, which means companies will likely pay more for these skills in the future.

**Read the full interview below:**

**Apoorva:** We recognise the importance of VET in driving the circular transition! While topics related to circularity are increasingly being integrated in higher education, the role of VET still has a lot of untapped potential. In your view, what are the key pathways through which VET can contribute to a circular transition?

**Maurijn:** When it comes to leveraging education for the circular transition, there is a lot of talking, and not enough doing. If we really wanted to make an impact, we should have done a lot more by now, beyond talking about the importance of skills and education. Nevertheless, there's been some encouraging progress—now, people are starting to recognise that there needs to be more change in VET. There is recognition that education in general (from primary school to university) will be key to equipping young people for the circular transition. VET will also play a major role. If the next generation is not equipped with the required skills, they won't be prepared to work in a circular labour market in the

future. So VET offers a lot of opportunities in terms of preparing people—not only to equip them with the tools to **do** and **know** but also, critically, in the **mindset** they should have. So



yes, there is a gradually increasing focus on VET. However, no one still clearly knows what we should be doing.

Encouragingly, we are seeing increased funding for VET—I now receive more funding for my work. And we need this! We need the push from the government to enable change because otherwise we cannot get

where we want to go.

At CRE, we've created a model to work with based on the eight skills [from Het Groene Brein and the Coöperatie Leren voor Morgen]. In addition to this, we've added four attributes to highlight the mindset required.

In the figure, the orange section shows the eight key skills:

- Levensduur verlengen—Extend lifecycles
- Digitaal werken—Work digitally
- Samenwerken in ketens—Collaborate across the value chains
- Meervoudige waarden creëren—Create multiple values
- Circulariteit herkennen en meten—Recognise and measure circularity
- Hoogwaardig hergebruik—Ensure high quality reuse
- Bewust materiaal gebruiken—Use materials consciously
- Losmaakbaar werken—Work modularly

There are also four mindset attributes:

- Inbedding en reflectie—Embed and reflect
- Verandering bewerkstelligen—Make change happen
- Verandering voorzien—Foresee change
- Holistisch denken—Think holistically

Mindset is at the core—it has to be the starting point. VET institutions need to first look at how circular they are in their mindset. And it's okay if they are not circular yet, because there are steps to get there. But mindset is where to start, and skills are built on top of that. If you look directly at skills, you skip the important step of understanding the mindset required.

**Apoorva:** Can you share some of the strategies you use to develop a circular mindset?

**Maurijn:** We are still taking baby steps. We want to make the teachers aware of the changes in our labor market so that they can adapt their outlook. We want to take our time but prepare them to be receptive to change and make them enthusiastic about adapting. For all teachers, we have a *circular tour* where we visit companies that are industry leaders in circularity. For example, we went to TESLA showrooms—and we involved teachers *across disciplines* because this tour is not only relevant to teachers in building or logistics, it's relevant to teachers across disciplines. We want to involve teachers and enable them to take ownership for their change. We don't want to drive their change—we'll nudge them but we want them to own it!

**Apoorva:** To take advantage of the circular transition, education and training providers need to adapt and anticipate skills needs. What practical tools or approaches do you use to anticipate requirements, and make decisions? How do you forecast and decide which skills need to be integrated into your curriculum?

**Maurijn:** We rightly call them tools, because the teams should see for themselves what they want to use. We don't want to tell any team that they should only use a 'screwdriver', for example. They need to use the tools in the toolbox that work best for them as they know their own needs best!



One aspect we focus on is to use challenge-based learning. So this way, students are not directed towards what they need to learn but they work with companies to enable a two-way sharing and learning process. At the CRE, we collaborate with companies to integrate challenges that are practical and hands-on for students to work on. So I would really emphasise challenge-based learning. Through this approach, students and companies are learning while the helix of entrepreneurship, communities and school are also learning. There should also be these kinds of hands-on assignments in schools; we need to normalise challenge-based learning. Currently, it is integrated in higher education, but less so for lower levels of learning. If we want to make a greater impact, we have to include this in all levels of education. And we should do this in a cross-over format, where we collaborate with other schools so that students also have the opportunity to work together.

**Apoorva:** We came across the exciting circular action lab for Flevoland called PRICE, which brings together entrepreneurs, businesses, students, teachers and municipalities. It is not often that we see this critical collaboration between stakeholders within government, industry and education. What critical opportunities do such collaborations provide?

**Maurijn:** I cannot say who should take the first step for sure but I think it should be government-led. In PRICE, we started in Almere—and looked beyond the city to examine how this is also important for the region. It is important to have such an action lab and involve multiple stakeholders in challenge-based learning. We are doing a lot for this, but still have a way to go. We want to have many more challenges from smaller companies in the region than we have now.

The PRICE initiative started with the entrepreneurial spirit of people. There are plenty of enthusiastic leaders in schools here. The next step is looking for partner businesses in the region. And within the region is key—because there are so many existing networks that can be leveraged to create connections. And this is how it works: we cannot just create a website and wait. **The answer lies in the way we work within the region**—we don't need to look globally. In the region, we need each other. There is an interdependency which makes this process so much more powerful.



**Apoorva:** There is often some stigma that surrounds VET and vocational professions. And in the Netherlands this is particularly surprising because the Dutch VET system is one of the best in the world, yet a CEDEFOP study showed that 41% of respondents in the Netherlands say that VET has a negative image (well above the EU average of 23%). What is your view on this and why do you think this is?

Parents used to think that you will only have a good job if you go through higher education. But we don't see this to be necessarily true—we see that workpeople, for instance, can really make a good amount of money for their skilled jobs. But there is definitely a negative perception. Luckily, this is changing—and is set to shift further due to shortages in skilled workers.

We are doing a lot to make people aware of VET and take up the study but there are still issues. I don't know how we can change the stigma. Time will tell. But I think this will change. In the future, companies will also have to pay more for such skills because of the shortage.

**Apoorva:** In your view, what is the role of HR in businesses in the circular transition? Do you believe that organisations' HRM has an active role to play in shaping the organisations' culture towards more sustainable, circular principles?

**Maurijn:** Yes, HR needs to be actively involved. Referring back to the skills and behaviour model we discussed, if HR sees the value in having people in the organisation who have circular competencies, they need to proactively upskill employees and promote a culture of lifelong learning. We need to ensure that not only managers have these competencies, but also people who are working on the ground. HR needs to see where the capital is in their organisation. It's not in the stocks or the building. The real capital is the human capital—especially now. People should be encouraged to leverage their entrepreneurial spirit and think with the company rather than for the company.

**Apoorva:** How can we empower workers to acquire skills and promote the uptake of vocational training?

**Maurijn:** So far, to be honest, VET has functioned as learning factories—where what we teach students has been directed by what companies need. But VET institutions need to be

more bold and be active participants in enabling and accelerating the circular transition. So maybe that's a little bit of this answer. Currently, people are put into boxes in VET education as well as in higher education. We need to change this and do the opposite. We need people who have divergent thinking. And our education system should not discourage divergent thinking!

**Apoorva:** What are three key recommendations (these can be to any actor(s) across industry, government, educators or civil society) to enable VET to be leveraged as a mechanism for driving the adoption of circular strategies, supporting equity and closing the skills gap?

Maurijn:

1. **For VET institutions and educators:** The way these educational institutions operate should change. Yes, updating the curriculum to reflect circularity is key but we need to also change how we operate and think and act out of our existing and limiting silos.
1. **For stakeholders in industry:** Work with educators within your region. Approach schools in your region and work with them.
2. **Governments:** Encourage schools, governments and companies to work together. Cooperation between the triple helix is key. If one of the parties is not involved, it will not work.