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INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY  
IN APPRENTICESHIPS: FOCUS  
ON LONG-TERM MOBILITY  
**NETHERLANDS**

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Please cite this publication as:

Westerhuis, A.F. (2020). *International mobility in apprenticeships: focus on long-term mobility: Netherlands*. Cedefop ReferNet thematic perspectives series.

[http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/international\\_mobility\\_apprenticeship\\_Netherlands\\_Cedefop\\_ReferNet.pdf](http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/international_mobility_apprenticeship_Netherlands_Cedefop_ReferNet.pdf)

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Reviewed by Cedefop

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# Acknowledgements

The author of this article would like to thank dr. Peter van IJsselmuiden, Coordinator International Affairs of the directorate Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs of the Ministry of Education, for his suggestions and review the draft of this article. And of course my colleague members of the Netherlands Refernet team, Hester Smulders and Annemiek Cox for theirs suggestions and support.

And above all, the international coordinators of the VET schools for their response to the questionnaire, both in terms of responding to the questions and their willingness to reflect on ways how to raise the number of apprentices engaged in cross-country mobility activities, and thank you, Gonnje van der Eerden - member of the Dutch Erasmus+ team - for all your work in developing the questionnaire and promoting its relevance among the VET schools' international coordinators!

Anneke Westerhuis

4 July 2019

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## CHAPTER 1.

# Introduction: apprentices in the Netherlands

Since 1996, when upper secondary VET was regulated in a separate Law <sup>(1)</sup>, different types of VET courses in terms of levels and pathways are integrated in one system. In EQF terms courses are offered at four levels (EQF 1-4) and - at all levels - in a school based pathway and in a dual pathway.

The dual pathway has its roots in the apprentice schemes formerly organised by sectoral bodies. Since 1996 they are fully integrated in upper secondary VET, in terms of governance and the construction of courses. In the school-based pathway (BOL - beroepsopleidende leerweg) practical periods in companies make up at least 20% of study time up to a maximum of 59%. The dual pathway (BBL - beroepsbegeleidende leerweg), training takes place in companies at least 60% of study time; the remaining time students will spend in school. School-based and dual pathways in upper secondary VET qualify for the same diplomas.

Under the 1996 law upper secondary VET is mainly provided by 43 Regional Training Centres (ROC's), i.e. VET schools. That is to say, the vast majority of VET students enrolls in ROC's who provide for a wide choice of programs in both pathways. Because of the high levels of autonomy, ROCs are relatively free in deciding which courses should be offered in one, or in both pathways. At system level, it was expected that a choice of pathways should make VET responsive to the economic cycle: in a period of economic boom and many vacancies, the number of students in the dual pathway will increase and decreases in the school-based pathway; the opposite will happen during an economic recession. Pathways should function as communicating vessels.

Interestingly, the history of the gestation of the current secondary VET system is still traceable. The former apprentice scheme offered courses at – in the current system – at EQF levels 2 and 3. As we will see, nowadays most students in the dual pathway (from now: apprentices) can still be found at those levels. As indeed the pathways do function as communicating vessels, the long-term trend is that enrolment figures are in decline for the dual one. The most important reason is that the VET levels where most of the apprentices can be

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(1) Adult Education and Vocational Education Act (Wet Educatie en Beroepsonderwijs; 1996 with later amendments) (<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0007625/2019-03-15>)

found, attract fewer students. The figure for 2018 is 24% of all VET students (486.000); in 2011 30% of all VET students (500.000) were in a dual pathway <sup>(2)</sup>:

Table 1. **Share (%) of apprentices by VET level (2018)**

VET level 1	VET level 2	VET level 3	VET level 4
20 %	36 %	43 %	13 %

Source: <https://www.onderwijsincijfers.nl/kengetallen/mbo/studenten-mbo/aantallen-studenten-mbo>

Maybe more interesting is the age of apprentices. Even though upper secondary VET is integrated in the education system, in particular VET courses in the dual pathway are regularly used for qualifying adults. For companies in particular VET level 2 and 3 courses serve as a tool to upgrade, or retrain, their workforce. While school leavers coming from lower secondary VET schools enrol in upper secondary VET at the age of 16, and a course will take on average (level 2) two years and at levels 3 and 4 three years, a great share of the 23 years olds are registered as apprentices (Table 2).

Table 2. **Share (%) of apprentices by age (2018)**

16	17	18	19	20/22	>23
8 %	11 %	14 %	17 %	26 %	71 %

Source: <https://www.onderwijsincijfers.nl/kengetallen/mbo/studenten-mbo/aantallen-studenten-mbo>

One could say that ROCs have the monopoly in providing dual courses. However, although the dual pathway is fully integrated into the upper secondary VET system, it still has strong roots in the business world. For many companies the pathway is part of their training policies, as it is the gateway for skilled jobs at operational levels as well as a tool to upgrade the workforce skills when necessary. For a long time, already, the demand for workers in level 2 jobs is dropping and rising at the higher levels; reflected in lower enrolment figures at VET level 2 and higher at VET level 3, and in particular level 4. It is very conceivable that in the near future the dual pathway in the Dutch VET system will be predominantly used for CVET purposes (upskilling the adults).

<sup>(2)</sup> <https://www.onderwijsincijfers.nl/kengetallen/mbo/studenten-mbo/aantallen-studenten-mbo>

## CHAPTER 2.

# Do exogenous factors influence cross-country mobility of apprentices?

### 2.1. The case of international mobility of apprentices

There are many arguments in favour of increasing apprentices' participation in (long term) cross-country learning mobility, both in terms of developing job specific and generic skills, better acquaintance with foreign languages and cultures, and in a broader acquaintance of work environments. This is also true for companies; for them, benefits may include higher levels of commitment, improved work performance, better skills management and wider knowledge of work processes and procedures of their workers.

Are apprentices and companies sensitive to these arguments? Doubtless, if long term cross-country learning experiences had been the exclusive route to these benefits. However, many of the arguments might as well apply to a VET course, possibly with the exception of better acquaintance with foreign languages and cultures, as the Erasmus+ Programme Guide observes <sup>(3)</sup>. Depending on the quality of their mentor or the variety of the competences they are allowed to practice, students might also develop job specific and generic skills in domestic internships. The same might be true for outcomes such as high levels of commitment, improved work performances, better skills management or a wide knowledge of work processes and procedures.

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<sup>(3)</sup> Erasmus+ Programme Guide, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-1/mobility-vet-staff\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-1/mobility-vet-staff_en)

**Box 1. Foreign experiences of an apprentice**

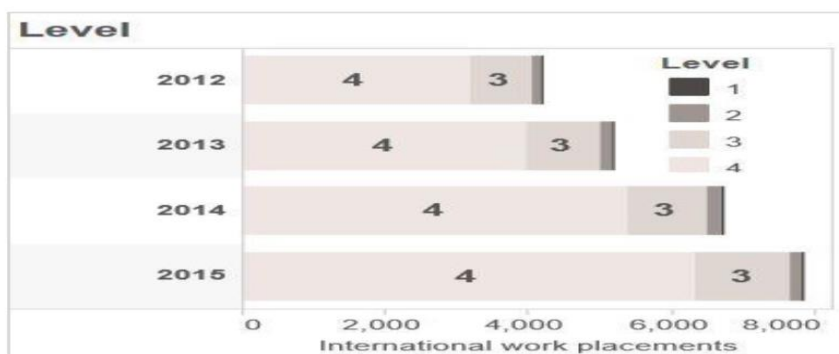
The only documented, however not representative example of an apprentice’s cross-country mobility experience, is Jessica’s visit to the USA. Jessica passed the level 4 Optician Manager course at Deltion College, Zwolle, in the dual pathway. She visited Los Angeles for a 4 weeks course in English: “my previous course was not really challenging and I doubted whether I might have to change studies, but then I realised I could do something extra in the summer period. I came across this course via Facebook ‘Learning English in America’, that seemed like something. You really get to know yourself in a different way being abroad on your own. The first day I was taken to school by my host mother. She said: ‘you have to find your way back home by yourself this afternoon’. That worked, with some asking around I knew which bus to take. When I’m graduated I like to continue studying abroad or work there, just to discover what else there is in the world.”

Source: Messelink, et. al, 2019, p. 78.

Apart from lacking empirical data on the added value of long term cross-country learning experiences, there is either much information on the experiences of apprentices actually involved in cross-country mobility. With the exception of some interviews, we simply don’t know whether - for the students or the companies - it has been more than the icing on the (education) cake.

Maybe one of the reasons for this lack of data is that the participation of apprentices (and employers) in (long-term) mobility is extremely low. In 2015 around 10 000 VET students were engaged in cross-border studying and working activities (NUFFIC, 2017). Half of them (52.6%) for a duration of three to six months; according to Dutch standards this counts as long term mobility (ibid.). The figure below, copied from this report, shows that by far the majority of the students follow a VET-course at level 4, and that the rise of the numbers can almost exclusively be attributed to this group. The share of students in level 2 courses, where most of the apprentices can be found, does not rise above 0.2%, while the total number of apprentices is 115 (out of 10 000); a 0.01% share.

**Figure 1. VET students engaged in cross-country mobility by level, 2012-2015**



Source: NUFFIC (2017). Statistics VET mobility. Den Haag: NUFFIC, p. 10



Mid 2018 the Minister of Education published a letter to Parliament outlining the Government's policy ambitions regarding the internationalisation of VET and Higher Education. The minister emphasises the importance of an international orientation for schools as well as students<sup>(4)</sup>. Although the share of VET-students engaged in international activities has risen to 7% (short- and long-term together) in 2015, much more can be done. Therefore, a new target has been set; in 2023 10% of all VET students should be engaged in short-term and long-term mobility (Ministerie van OCW, 2018).

So by the look of it, it is not so much a lack of support from the schools and the Ministry that hamper apprentices to engage in cross-country mobility. May be economic factors...

## 2.2. Economic factors possibly hampering apprentices' transnational mobility

What economic factors in terms of openness to international markets or foreign affiliates, could possibly influence the number of apprentices participating in an international mobility scheme? In the first place, the dual pathway in Dutch VET is primarily a qualification route intended to produce new generations of skilled workers, just like the school-based pathway. However, for historic reasons the dual pathway is popular in domestic sectors, in particular in the construction industry, hospitality and car repair. In addition, the dual pathway is foremost popular in courses and at EQF level 2, meaning that on average apprentices are very young, between 16 and 18 years of age.

Secondly, studies on incoming migration tell us that the majority of migrants (59% of an annual figure of 31.000) stay for a maximum of 6 years. They are divided into two major groups: 'labour migrants' and 'knowledge migrants'. The first group can be found in semi- and unskilled jobs, in particular in the construction and agriculture sectors, the latter in higher paid positions in commercial services and research. Although no data are available, it is not very likely that knowledge migrants (40%), or labour migrants (60%) are sent to VET courses with an apprentice's status by their employers, given their educational background and relatively short stay in the Netherlands (CBS, 2019). In other words, both groups are not likely to add to the figures of the incoming international mobility of apprentices.

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(4) Please note, not for companies!

Finally, a rare example of a VET programme with internships to be spent abroad: in 2015 the Nijmegen based VET school, close to the German border, introduced a four-year ‘international’ nurse training program (EQF level 4). While lessons are provided in Nijmegen, students will follow internships, around 80 weeks in total, at hospitals in Germany (Kleve or Münster) or Belgium (Leuven). However, this program is offered in the school-based pathway only, and apart for idealistic reasons, as graduates will increase their job opportunities, there is also a pragmatic reason for the introduction of this cross country program. This ROC - like other Dutch VET schools – is struggling with shortages of internships for nursing <sup>(5)</sup>. This initiative solves the problems of a VET school, as much as the problems of an economic sector. This example is to substantiate the thesis that pure economic factors hardly play a role in hampering (or stimulating) apprentices to go abroad.

The simple answer to the question whether economic factors hamper the international mobility of apprentices is no. Traditionally, apprenticeships concentrate in some (domestic) sectors and at some levels. So, levels and sectors have an impact on the opportunities of apprentices to engage in international mobility, but not in an active form; as if apprentices in some sectors have more to go abroad than apprentices in other sectors. This is not the case. Apprenticeships are dominantly found in domestic sectors and apprentices are on average very young. VET-students preferring to work in other sectors will be trained in the school based pathway <sup>(6)</sup>

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<sup>(5)</sup> <https://www.staz.nl/werken-gezondheidszorg-grens-euregio-opleiding-en-emigratiebeurs>

<sup>(6)</sup> The differences between both pathways are gradual: in the school based pathway students attend school for about 3 or 4 days a week , and in the dual pathway for 1 or 2 days a week.

## CHAPTER 3.

# Links between the Dutch apprenticeship scheme design and student mobility

### 3.1. Characteristics of the Dutch apprenticeship scheme in VET

Companies are - by law - only allowed to offer training places to VET students in both pathways, if they meet, after inspection, the criteria of the national Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB). These criteria also apply to foreign companies:

- (a) the company's activities match with the student's program (full qualification or parts thereof);
- (b) the company provides for the student's supervision by a competent trainer;
- (c) the workplace meets general safety requirements <sup>(7)</sup>.

Similar conditions apply to taking an exam in the foreign company for the components of the program that have been followed in this company.

The ROC is – by law responsible for the education of their students, including the workplace training in companies. Therefore, in both pathways an agreement has to be concluded for every internship, covering the rights and obligations of all parties involved: the student, the school and the accredited company. It contains clauses on the contacts between the school and the company, the assessment of the student in the workplace and the duration of the internship. A training company is legally liable for the damage the trainee or apprentice causes during the performance of his/her duties; a student does not have to prove that an accident occurred without fault. If a training company does not agree with this, the student and the school do not have to sign the agreement (ibid).

There is only one form of apprenticeships in The Netherlands; the dual pathway within upper secondary vocational education. In this pathway, as described in the Introduction chapter, at least 60% of the training time takes

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(7) <https://www.s-bb.nl/en/companies/work-placement>

place in a company. In most cases an apprentice will spend, on a weekly base, one day at school and four in a company; it's the usual formula for an internship. The other being internships of seven to 12 weeks successively. This formula is customary for VET courses preparing for occupations in riding schools, horse breeding or shipping; venues not close to home.

The share of apprentices is relatively high in VET courses at level 2 and 3, where students are between 16 and 18 (level 2) and 16 and 19 (level 3) years old. NUFFIC figures on international mobility show that the majority of the mobile VET students is between 19 and 22 years old; underage students are hardly found in international work placements (2017). This is because many foreign companies don't accept international students under 18 (NUFFIC, 2017). This restriction makes it almost impossible for level 2 students (full time students and apprentices alike) to participate in a cross-country mobility scheme.

One could say that companies involved in upper secondary VET by offering internships (in both pathways) are socialised in the training system, symbolised by submitting to an accreditation system and signing an agreement, together with the VET school and a student. Therefore, it will be no surprise that the main actor to organise and promote student mobility is the VET school. In terms of education policies, VET-schools have a lot of autonomy. School autonomy also apply to the involvement of the school in international activities; some are very active in promoting and supporting students to engage in cross-border study and working activities, while in other schools one or two dedicated teachers have committed themselves to organise international activities. In other words, for VET students, opportunities for being engaged in international activities will very much depend on the priority given to this topic by their own school.

#### Box 2. **Cross-country mobility priorities of Dutch VET schools**

Preparing this article we submitted a short questionnaire to all 'international coordinators' working in VET schools; 25 of them (60%) responded. When asked whether apprentices are a specific target group in promoting cross-national mobility, 20 (80%) responded negative. However, for many coordinators the questions themselves served as an eye-opener in realising that apprentices are a forgotten group in promoting and facilitating cross-country mobility.

Source: Messelink, et. al, 2019, p. 78.

#### *Dimensions of VET's dual pathway disabling cross-country mobility*

Current regulations and the distribution of responsibilities in upper secondary VET have the unforeseen effect that, especially for apprentices, it is particularly difficult to get engaged in cross-country mobility:

- (a) Two formal law-based conditions apply to both pathways in VET, but might have a greater effect on apprentices' mobility opportunities, as they spent more time at the workplace. Together they create a barrier for foreign companies to host Dutch apprentices: foreign companies (i) are allowed to offer training places to VET students and to take exams for components of the program that have been followed in this company, but only under the condition of meeting the same criteria as valid for Dutch companies, (ii) have also to sign an agreement covering rights and obligations of all parties.
- (b) Because of the organisation of an apprenticeship in the alternation of learning at school and learning and working in a company on a weekly basis, an apprentice going abroad is for at least 60% of the working time not available for his/her Dutch company for a considerable period of time, without much added value for the company itself.

As many foreign companies don't accept foreign students under 18, it's almost impossible for apprentices in level 2 courses, often in the dual pathway, to participate in a mobility scheme, as they are between 16 and 18 years old.
- (c) For VET students, opportunities for being engaged in international activities will very much depend on the priority given to this topic by their own school. Until now, not many VET schools identified apprentices as a specific target group for cross-country mobility, which in itself is not surprising as schools are not in a position to change most of the conditions under which apprentices work and learn in a company.

## CHAPTER 4.

# Conclusions

Like in many countries, the share of apprentices participating in cross-country mobility schemes is low, extremely low even with only 0.01% of all VET students going abroad. Searching for explanations, possible causes have been eliminated in succession, leaving some likely disablers, but no 'smoking gun'.

For the Netherlands it is not likely that economic factors hamper the cross-country mobility of apprentices, as apprenticeships are more embedded in the education system than in the economic system; the only exogenous factor we found is that many foreign companies don't accept foreign students under 18, excluding many students in VET level 2 courses where a relatively great share are in the dual pathway. It is not a lack of (moral) support from the schools or from the Ministry disabling apprentices to engage in cross-country mobility.

We conclude that some system characteristics hamper the mobility of apprentices in particular. We identified three conditions, in terms of education-driven criteria, foreign companies have to meet for hosting Dutch VET students which might have a greater effect on apprentices' mobility opportunities, as they spend more time at the workplace compared to VET students in the school-based pathway. In addition, because of the organisation of apprenticeships in the alternation of learning at school and in a company on a weekly basis, it is not very attractive for Dutch companies to allow an apprentice to study abroad for a considerable period of time, with hardly any added value for the company itself.

For VET students, opportunities for being engaged in international activities will very much depend on the priority given to this topic by their own school. Until now, not many VET schools have identified apprentices as a specific target group for cross-country mobility, which in itself is not surprising as schools are not in a position to change the conditions under which apprentices work and learn. Efforts of a great number of stakeholders are needed to lower the threshold for apprentices to engage in (long term) international activities. This article might serve as a wakeup call. Needless to say that rising the numbers of apprentices engaged in long-term mobility is a long shot under these conditions.

## List of abbreviations

BBL	beroepsbegeleidende leerweg [dual partway in VET]
BOL	beroepsopleidende leerweg [school-based pathway in VET]
CBS	centraal bureau voor de statistiek [statistics Netherlands]
CVET	continuous vocational education and training
EQF	European qualification framework
NUFFIC	Netherlands universities' foundation for international cooperation; The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education
OCW	onderwijs, cultuur en wetenschap [Ministry of Education]
ROC	regionaal opleidingen centrum [Regional Training Centre]
SBB	stichting beroepsonderwijs bedrijfsleven [foundation for cooperation on vocational education, training and the labour market]
VET	Vocational education and training

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