

Raising the profile of Associate degrees

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

REGULATION/LEGISLATION

 NETHERLANDS

Timeline



ID number 28444

Background

Since September 2013, short-cycle, two-year higher education programmes (Associate degree or Ad, ISCED 554, EQF level 5; 120 ECTS) have been carried out. Ad programmes were part of bachelor programmes, allowing further progression in higher education.

Objectives

The objective of this act is to give Ad programmes an independent profile and position.

Description

In 2016, the education ministry proposed ending the connection with bachelor programmes and giving Ad a stand-alone position. In February 2017, the Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (*Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, WHW*) was amended accordingly.

Since 2018, Ad has become a stand-alone programme. Consequently, these programmes should respond better to labour market and adult learners' needs. A greater variety of Ad programmes will also better suit the needs of MBO students and the employed. Ad programmes are of particular interest to those with a VET qualification at upper secondary level.

2016 Legislative process

2017 Approved/Agreed

In February 2017, the Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (*Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, WHW*) was amended, making the Associate degree a stand-alone programme. This amendment of the act was put into effect in 2018.

2018 Implementation

Since 1 January 2018, Associate degree programmes (Ad programmes) have been given independent status in Dutch higher education.

2019 Implementation

The measure is operational and runs as a regular practice.

2020 Implementation

The measure is operational and runs as a regular practice.

2021 Implementation

Associate degree developments are monitored. The first interim report shows positive results on overall Ad developments: supply and student numbers have been growing. Roughly 20 Ad programmes are added every year. However, bringing Ads to students' attention and encouraging subject-specific progression remain issues of concern.

2022 Implementation

The Council for upper secondary VET schools and the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences are strengthening their cooperation in the field of Associate degree programmes. In a covenant, they underline that they are joining hands to further roll out successful Ad education. The covenant, titled 'Stronger Together' should give a major boost to the supply of Ad courses. Ad programmes are especially relevant given the current labour shortages in specific sectors, such as healthcare, engineering or education.

2023 Completed

The final report of the Ad monitor shows positive growth in Associate Degree (Ad) programmes in the Netherlands, with more institutions offering these programmes and generally high levels of student satisfaction. The short programme duration of the programmes and the option to progress to a bachelor's degree contribute significantly to their appeal.

Despite this success, challenges remain. Ad programmes are still predominantly business-focused, and a more balanced distribution across various sectors is needed, especially in regions and fields facing labour shortages. The growth of technical Ad programmes is promising, but further expansion is necessary. Collaboration between higher professional education institutions and VET schools is crucial, yet these partnerships are often not sustained beyond the initial setup. Strengthening these connections is essential, given that many Ad students come from VET backgrounds.

Additionally, raising awareness of the Ad programmes and establishing lasting relationships with companies is vital to enhancing recognition of Ad graduates in the job market. Efforts will focus on improving these areas through collaboration with relevant organisations, and the developments will continue to be monitored closely to ensure progress.

Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Target group

Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices
Young people (15-29 years old)

Thematic categories

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Modernising VET standards, curricula, programmes and training courses

Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

Subsystem

IVET CVET

Further reading

[Policy letter on Associate degree Monitor \(June 2021\)](#)

[Covenant on Ad programmes \(May 2022\)](#)

[Policy letter on final version of Associate degree Monitor \(March 2023\)](#)

“ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). Raising the profile of Associate degrees: Netherlands. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2025 update) [Online tool].

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/28444>