

Long-term cross-country mobility in apprenticeships

Case Study Report

Cedefop project on Long-term cross-country mobility in apprenticeships
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Introduction

Generally, international mobility in VET is faring well in the Netherlands. International mobility mainly takes place in the form of internships via the school-based pathway.¹ Apart from the school-based pathway VET institutions also offer an apprenticeship-based pathway which meets the definition used by Cedefop. This pathway leads to the same diploma as the school-based pathway, however in this apprenticeship pathway international mobility is practically non-existent. The reasons of which will become clear throughout this report.

I. Framework level

The Dutch economy is open to trade and characterised by a heavy reliance on exports² as the sixth largest economic power in the Eurozone and the fifth largest exporter of goods. For example, for the agricultural sector the Netherlands is the second largest exporter in the world³. Consequently, the country can be sensitive to the global economic conjuncture. Even though reliance on international trade is significant, the proportion of employees in SMEs of fewer than 25 persons in the Netherlands is 65.7%, close to the EU28 average of 66.3%. Therefore SMEs play an important role in the Dutch 'non-financial business economy'.⁴ According to the latest data of 2018, they generate 61.8 % of overall value added — higher than the EU average of 56.8% — and account for 64.2% of overall employment — slightly less than the EU average of 66.4%⁵. It is in this SME sector where most apprenticeships take place.

II. System level

¹ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET. This report was written as a part of the Cedefop study on international mobility of apprentices, see <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fi/events-and-projects/networks/refernet/thematic-perspectives/international-mobility-apprentices>

² European Commission, (2018). *2018 SBA Fact Sheet – The Netherlands*

³ Second after USA. Most important products are ornamentals, pork meat, dairy and eggs. Jukema, G., P. Ramaekers, P. Berkhout (2020). *De Nederlandse agrarische sector in internationaal verband*. Wageningen/Heerlen/Den Haag, Wageningen Economic Research en Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Rapport 2020-001.

⁴ This includes industry, construction, trade and services.

⁵ European Commission, (2018). *2018 SBA Fact Sheet – The Netherlands*

In 2019, a study on mobility for apprenticeships in the Netherlands was conducted by the Refernet team.⁶ This study gives an insightful description of the role of apprentices in the Dutch VET system. The most important characteristics of the system and its background are the following.

Since 1996, different types of VET courses in terms of levels and tracks are integrated in one system. In EQF terms, courses are offered at four levels (EQF 1-4) and - at all levels - in the school-based pathway and in apprenticeships⁷. Apprenticeships have their roots in the apprentice schemes formerly organised by sectoral bodies. An essential element is that both the school-based and apprenticeship-based pathways in upper secondary VET lead to the same diploma. The apprenticeship-based pathway corresponds to the apprenticeship type B in the classification of Cedefop⁸: apprenticeship as a type of VET delivery within the formal VET system. In the school-based pathway (BOL - *beroepsopleidende leerweg*), practical work periods in companies make up at least 20% of study time up to a maximum of 59%. Even though this pathway is classified as school-based, many stakeholders in the field argue that this definition is too limited to accurately represent the school-based pathway and find that it should be viewed as a dual pathway instead.

In the apprenticeship-based pathway (BBL - *beroepsbegeleidende leerweg*), training in companies makes up at least 60% of study time up to 100%; the remaining time is spent by students at school. In addition, students in the apprenticeship-based pathway (apprentices) have a fixed-term work contract with a company. Around 20% of all vocational students choose the apprenticeship option.

Originally, the former apprentice scheme offered courses at EQF levels 2 and 3. Nowadays most students in the apprenticeship-based pathway can still be found at those levels.

As expected, both pathways function at system level as communicating vessels, which makes VET responsive to the economic cycle: in periods of economic prosperity characterised by job creation, the number of students increases in the apprenticeship-based pathway and decreases in the school-based pathway; the opposite happens during an economic recession. However, the long-term trend is that enrolment figures have been in decline for the apprenticeship-based pathway. The most important reason is that VET – where most of the apprentices can be found – today attracts fewer students.

The average age of VET students differs considerably between both pathways. The share of apprentices is much higher among higher age groups than among younger groups. Apprenticeships are regularly used for CVET purposes. For companies, in particular VET at Levels 2 and 3 serves as a tool to upskill or

⁶ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

⁷ In the Refernet study this pathway is referred to as the dual pathway.

⁸ Cedefop (2018). *Apprenticeship schemes in European countries. A cross-nation overview.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

retrain, their workforce. A great share (71%) of the 23+ years old VET students are registered as apprentices, with this is only 8% among 16-year-old VET students.

Apprenticeships still have strong roots in the business world. For many companies, apprenticeships are a part of their training policies as it is the gateway to skilled jobs at operational levels as well as a tool to upskill the workforce when necessary. For a long time already, the demand for workers in Level 2 jobs is dropping but it is rising at higher EQF Levels; this is reflected in the lower enrolment figures at VET Level 2 and the higher enrolment figures at Level 3, and in particular at Level 4. The Refernet study concludes that is very conceivable that in the near future the apprenticeship-based pathway in the Dutch VET system will be predominantly used for CVET purposes.

III. Implementation level

According to Nuffic's⁹ statistics published in October 2017, between 2013 and 2015, the estimated share of VET graduates who had spent more than two weeks abroad for study exchange or a work placement was 7%. This is one percentage point above the 6% EU benchmark on outward mobility.¹⁰ However, almost all internationally mobile students followed the school-based pathway, since it is better suited to the conditions of an international experience. In 2015-2016, there were only 115 internationally mobile students taking the apprenticeship pathway (BBL).¹¹ Moreover, In 2015-2016, the majority of the students (52.6%) went abroad for a period of 3 to 6 months, while 38.7% did an international work placement for a period shorter than three months.¹² That said, in the same period, 707 VET students went abroad for a period of six months or more – approximately 8.7% of all the students who went on an international work placement.¹³ Taking into account the limited number of apprentices and the limited number of students that have engaged in a placement abroad for longer than six months, it can be concluded that, long-term cross border mobility for apprentices is practically almost nonexistent in the Netherlands.

⁹ <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/>

¹⁰ Nuffic, (2017). *Statistics – VET Mobility*, 19.10.2017, <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/statistics-vet-mobility/>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 1. State of play

1.1. Framework level

1.1.1. Role of the business structure (1.1)

An important feature of the Dutch economy is the high share of SMEs in total employment. SMEs are also the places where most students do their apprenticeships. In general terms, key stakeholders consider mobility less relevant for SMEs than for multinational companies. They attribute this to several factors: in SMEs, the importance of reaching short-term goals (making sure the daily work is done) is higher than in larger companies; the international scope is lesser; and HR is less well developed. This makes that there is less willingness on the part of SMEs to consider the benefits arising from the long-term mobility of apprentices or employees. Moreover: there is no direct dependency on mobility to sustain business. For larger companies, it is easier to invest in mobility as they can use their own foreign affiliates or relations and there is greater scope to invest in long-term goals.

1.1.2. The role of sectoral employer organisations in the Netherlands (1.2, 1.3)

Sectoral employer organisations (SEOs) have a strong position in the Netherlands.¹⁴ Sectoral organisations, are united under one national umbrella employer organisation for small, medium sized and large enterprises (VNO-NCW/MKB Nederland). This organisation represents employers in several national councils that have a direct advisory role to the government.

Social partners, both employer organisations and labour trade unions, state that neither they receive any requests for information about the possibilities for international apprenticeship mobility specifically, or for the international mobility of employees or students in general terms, nor they receive complaints about the lack of possibilities. The national employer organisation support VET students' mobility in general terms but remain neutral regarding of the relevance of international

¹⁴ <https://www.vno-ncw.nl/over-vno-ncw/english>

mobility for apprentices or workers, as long as there is no demand for it among employers or workers.

Other stakeholders, like the ministries, VET providers, SBB¹⁵ and JOB¹⁶, do not receive such requests from either.

1.1.3. The role of internationalisation in the Dutch economy (1.4, 1.5, 1.6)

The field research has confirmed that the business structure in the Netherlands is in principle favourable to mobility as the country has an open economy with a high dependency on exports and a growing number of companies that have relations abroad. This creates a need for intercultural abilities among employees, which can be developed through international mobility. Sectors with significant numbers of internationally mobile students are for example hospitality and agriculture. This is due to the fact that the Netherlands is the second largest exporting country of agricultural products in the world. Other sectors that can be considered as highly internationalised are for example transport or industry. Stakeholders argue that this is due to a long-standing tradition on internationalisation, mobility and exchange, also at university level. Several respondents find that mobility is much higher in border regions e.g. Germany and Belgium. The economies of border regions are highly interwoven, meaning that a considerable amount of present mobility in VET and especially in apprenticeships can be related to these intense border relations. Therefore, international trade could be seen as an enabler of mobility.

However, when looking at certain economic sectors, we see that apprenticeship mobility is not as high as could be expected despite the importance of exports or international relations. VET providers see that apprenticeships in general are traditionally higher in sectors with less internationalisation, e.g. engineering or retail. All the stakeholders interviewed see the added value of mobility. However even though the economy of the Netherlands is highly dependent on exports, international mobility is not considered a necessity to maintain or further develop exports of international relations. Apart from that, stimulating international mobility in apprenticeships is not a necessity as there are already possibilities in the school-based pathway.

¹⁵ Cooperation organisation for VET and companies.

¹⁶ National Youth Organisation for VET students

1.1.4. Labour migration and skills shortages (1.7, 1.8, 1.10)

Recruiting workers from abroad is a strategy used by Dutch companies to deal with present shortages on the labour market, however this does not take form in an apprenticeship construction. None of the interviewees have a clear picture of incoming mobility of apprentices since it is not actively monitored. However, what we do know based on the data of Nuffic, is that for VET as a whole, including the school-based pathway, incoming mobility of VET students to the Netherlands is much lower than outgoing cross-border mobility of Dutch students.

Even though migration legislation is neither seen as an enabler nor as an obstacle in general, apprenticeships are not used to recruit and train migrant workers according to all the stakeholders interviewed for this case study. Employers gave several reasons why apprenticeships are not a relevant instrument in this respect: firstly, they will invariably recruit workers who are already skilled at their jobs; secondly, most migrant workers are recruited for low-skilled work which does not require any additional training; thirdly, employers are not willing to invest in employees that are likely return to their country and therefore will be of little added value. A pilot project currently running in the Netherlands that aims to facilitate the hiring of apprentices from outside the EU is being used much less than expected. Apprenticeships have been successfully used for asylum seekers and are generally considered a useful construct for their integration, but these are not the same as mobility apprenticeships.

1.1.5. Lifelong learning and apprentice mobility (1.9)

The ministry of Education, VET providers, and social partners see limited potential in the mobility of employees as an instrument for lifelong learning (LLL). Currently, there is little such mobility, and especially not in an apprenticeship context. These stakeholders see lifelong learning as a major priority for the upskilling or employment of adults but consider the role of mobility in this context as unclear. They rather see mobility as a possible opportunity for employees to specialise in new or innovative techniques. However, this implies such innovative techniques are only available abroad and are necessary for the employees to obtain or sustain a job. Moreover, they also consider that long-term mobility is not necessary for workers to obtain international experience; this can be done through short-term internships or even company training. Another obstacle to LLL could do with workers' age. VET providers, their representative and a labour union expect that most employees are not willing to go abroad since many are 40+ years old,

often with responsibilities for a family, a mortgage, etc. If they wish to engage in LLL, it is likely that an international experience is not of any added value, let alone a long-term placement.

1.1.6. International qualifications and tradition (1.11, 1.12)

Both social partners and VET providers state that international qualifications currently do not play a role in enabling mobility. One of the experts on international student mobility states for example that international double degrees and joint degrees are still not extensively developed. VET providers and Erasmus + mention only a few very specialised examples of international curricula, such as Bitech, or parts of curricula that have international elements, e.g. in gastronomy or the creative sector. These examples are mainly applied in the school-based pathway and not so much in apprenticeships. Moreover, SBB, VET providers, and the National VET council find that VET qualifications still differ considerably between countries. This is different for higher education where there are systems in place such as ECTS, which allows for more comparability and transparency. In VET, there has not been a drive to harmonise qualifications like in higher education with the Bologna process. The same experts acknowledge the potential of EQF and ECVET for comparability and recognition, however they find that the alignment of VET qualifications with EQF and ECVET still needs attention.

Tradition seems to have a role in mobility. As mentioned before, some sectors have a stronger tradition in international mobility due to their global interconnectedness (e.g. agriculture and hospitality). However, other sectors have a strong international profile too and do not have a strong tradition in mobility (transport, industry). This sectoral differentiation is also true for higher education: for example, agricultural studies at university level also have a strong tradition of internationalisation. VET providers and experts say that apprenticeships are more prevalent in those sectors with a less strong tradition in mobility, like transport and industry.

In general, stakeholders point out that higher education (HE) has a longer tradition in international mobility than VET. This does not make tradition necessarily a determining factor, as specific policy measures taken in HE had a positive effect on the growth of mobility. VET is behind higher education on international mobility, but the Ministry of education reports an increase from 1.7% in 2006 to 7.6% in 2018 in cross border mobility in VET. Targeted policies can make a difference according to the Ministry. Perceptions around international mobility in VET have also changed according to the Ministry of education: 15 years ago, mobility for VET was seen as something that could stay limited to the

neighbouring countries, but nowadays the policy is to increase VET mobility overall.

Although at framework level the situation in the Netherlands has some enabling aspects, in general interviewees point out that in apprenticeships there is currently little to no tradition of international mobility. However, this is found as a logical result due to the obstacles in implementation, the absence of a strong demand from employers or employees, combined with the disadvantages they encounter in the apprenticeship context. The main disadvantage in apprenticeships for cross border mobility is the loss of labour for the employer. This is further discussed in the chapter on implementation level.

Key enablers and disablers at framework level

At framework level, the Netherlands have some favourable conditions for the long-term cross-border mobility of apprentices. Enablers would thus include the internationally oriented Dutch economy, the influential position of the SEO in policymaking, and the use of apprentices for LLL. All these enablers come with some nuance. Not all internationally oriented economic sectors score high in mobility, the national SEO is not actively committed to stimulating the international mobility of apprentices and long-term mobility is not considered a relevant instrument for LLL. This is further explained in the following chapters.

Some disablers can also be identified at framework level. The share of SMEs in employment is rather high. Mobility in SMEs seems more difficult to arrange than in large multinational companies. And the international comparability of qualifications still needs attention. This is not as well arranged yet in VET as it is in higher education (HE).

Present labour shortages can be considered both as a potential enabler and a disabler. Shortages on the labour market have a disabling effect, as employers do not want to run the risk of losing their apprentices when they move abroad. Shortages could be an enabler because potentially apprenticeships could be used as an instrument to recruit and train personnel from abroad. However, this is not happening in practice. Recruiting personnel abroad and training them in Netherlands cannot be considered as apprenticeship mobility.

1.2. System level

1.2.1. Apprenticeship type, share of students, and function (2.1, 2.2 and 2.3)

As described in the introduction, the VET system in the Netherlands has two main pathways, namely BOL (school-based), and BBL (apprenticeship-based). The apprenticeship-based pathway corresponds to the apprenticeship type B: apprenticeship as a type of VET delivery within the formal VET system.¹⁷ The total share of VET students who were internationally mobile is 7%. Of this group, only 115 students were apprentices. The focus in international mobility remains on the school-based pathway. This training scheme is also fairly work-based (20-59%).

Among the stakeholders interviewed, there are some differences in terms of whether or not apprenticeships would be a good construct for CBLTMA. One of the experts in international student mobility believes the conditions of apprenticeships facilitate cross-border mobility more easily than the school-based pathway, as less involvement of the school is needed and there is some complexity attached to schools being involved in apprenticeship arrangements. On the other hand, VET providers do not find that apprenticeships are suitable for mobility. They have various reasons: first, the curriculum is less flexible and might therefore result in study delay; secondly, apprentices depend a lot on their employer. For employers there are several reasons why stimulating the long-term cross-border mobility of apprentices makes little sense, which is explained in the implementation level chapter.

Another reason for the low participation in international mobility of apprentices are the fairly good possibilities for mobility in the school-based pathway combined with the possibility to switch from one pathway to another. This is mentioned by VET council, TVET providers and the Ministry of Education. If a student is enthusiastic about international mobility, he wouldn't choose for an apprenticeship but for the school-based pathway, or, if the student is already enrolled in an apprenticeship, he could switch to the school-based pathway during his training. Therefore, several stakeholders that were interviewed, such as the VET providers, believe that there is no incentive to shift the international mobility focus towards the apprenticeship pathway, since the school-based pathway is also accessible for these students.

With this idea in mind, they believe that students could start in the school-based pathway for their internship or other type of in-company training abroad, and

¹⁷ Cedefop (2018). Apprenticeship schemes in European countries. A cross-nation overview. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

when they return they could switch to the apprenticeship pathway. In that way they do not encounter the difficulties of international mobility for apprentices. Moreover, they argue that there are simply other priorities for schools to focus on in the light of internationalisation such as promoting internationalisation for lower levels of VET or in sectors that are less likely to participate. A recommendation made by the Ministry of Education and a student mobility expert is to make better use of the possibility to switch from one pathway to another. If a student would start in the school-based pathway, it wouldn't be necessary to find an employer before starting the training. Being enrolled in the school-based pathway, he could orientate towards international mobility and then find an employer abroad for his work placement. Once the employer is found, he could switch from the school-based pathway to an apprenticeship.

According to the VET students' representative the low number of mobility among apprentices discourages apprentices from spending time abroad. Apprentices lack examples showing the opportunities of an experience abroad. And for teachers and coordinators there are little opportunities to stimulate them to spend some time abroad; apprentices are not as closely in contact with schools as other students or learners and teachers and coordinators tend to focus more on the school-based pathway, according to student association representatives.

In terms of incoming mobility there is very little knowledge. Generally, the interviewed stakeholders are not familiar with any examples.

1.2.2. Apprenticeship characteristics (2.4 until 2.12)

Funding and remuneration: Investing in apprenticeships is costly for employers as apprentices earn a salary in the Netherlands. Employers would therefore require an added value or a compensation to cover the lost revenue in case of mobility of their apprentice. Currently this is not in place. Stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and social partners find that the willingness of employers to invest in apprenticeships, not to mention long-term cross-border mobility, is subject to the economic climate.

Contract type: According to the social partners interviewed, contracts can be an issue for Dutch apprentices going abroad. In the Netherlands apprentices receive a contract and a salary, meaning that their status as an employee is well protected. This might not be the case abroad, which makes protecting their rights and status as an employee more difficult. As there are very few examples on this topic, the social partners could not pinpoint if this would truly become an issue.

Duration of internship: The duration of the work-based part of the training in apprenticeships (about 60 to 80% of their training time, on average 76%¹⁸) is by VET providers considered too high to make mobility possible. Employers count on the fact that apprentices will spend time on the work floor. This leaves little space for mobility. A compensation for the employer, either financial or by arranging exchange with an incoming apprentice, is suggested as a solution.

1.2.3. Curriculum training standard and use of validation (2.13 and 2.14)

Flexibility of curricula: The stakeholder interviews revealed there are various opinions in this regard. Social partners and VET providers argue that the 4+1 model (4 days of work-based learning and one day of theory classes at school) does not give much room for mobility. If mobility takes place abroad in a foreign company, a problem could occur with the school-based part of the curriculum. Students undertaking an apprenticeship abroad would then have to catch up with the curriculum upon their return, delaying the completion of their studies. However, some other VET providers and the Ministry of Education find that curricula are becoming increasingly flexible.

A disabler for incoming mobility could be that the Dutch qualification system requires a certain level of Dutch proficiency, which might form a legal barrier for international qualifications. On the other hand, according to social partners, foreign language proficiency might also be an issue for outgoing apprentices because foreign language learning is only a minor part of the VET curriculum in the Netherlands.

Validation: An issue put forth by VET providers concerns the comparability and standardization of qualifications and validation of learning outcomes. VET providers and social partners see some issues such as the recognition of diplomas across different countries, and differences in curricula and study levels. They argue that it is currently difficult to compare study programmes from abroad and control them for quality. One expert still sees differences in level between similar qualifications in different countries, although they have the same EQF level. The implementation of EQF still needs attention.

¹⁸ Westerhuis, A. Smulders, H., Cox, A. (2014). Apprenticeship-type schemes and structured work-based learning programmes. The Netherlands. Den Bosch: ecbo / REFERNET. See: https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2015/ReferNet_NL_2014_WBL.pdf

The Dutch curriculum is outcome-based, and schools are rather autonomous in how to reach these outcomes. The school-based pathway leaves more flexibility than apprenticeships for reaching set learning outcomes as the dependency on the employer is lesser. This school-based pathway better suited for mobility than apprenticeships.

The recognition of learning outcomes is an issue in VET because there is no system to harmonise levels and study programmes unlike in Higher Education with the Bologna process. This creates major obstacles for both incoming and outgoing mobility.

1.2.4. Legal basis for apprenticeships and integration of mobility (2.15)

Legal conditions for the school-based pathway and the apprenticeship pathway are identical, from an educational point of view. They fall under the same legislation and result in the award of identical diplomas, as confirmed by the Ministry of education. There is however no specific law on apprenticeships and mobility.

Westerhuis (2019) sees that there are legal disadvantages for apprentices getting involved in mobility: there are three law-based conditions that apply to both pathways in VET and that are relevant for foreign companies:

- i) foreign companies are allowed to offer training places to VET students
- ii) foreign companies can take exams for components of the programme they followed during their time at company, under the condition of meeting criteria also valid for Dutch companies,
- iii) foreign companies have to sign an agreement covering rights and obligations of all parties.¹⁹

These conditions might form a greater obstacle to the mobility of apprentices than to the mobility of students in the school-based pathway. Apprentices spend more time at the workplace and so might create a barrier for companies in particular to host Dutch apprentices. The current regulations and the distribution of responsibilities in upper secondary VET in the Netherlands have, as mentioned in the REFERNET study, an unforeseen effect making it difficult for apprentices to engage in cross-country mobility.²⁰

Apart from educational law and regulations, regulations on labour conditions are also relevant. Between the school-based pathway and

¹⁹ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

²⁰ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

apprenticeships the main difference in labour conditions is that in the school-based pathway a student is an intern, working on an internship contract, while an apprentice is formally an employee of the company with a temporary labour agreement. This might cause contractual barriers in case of mobility. However, the stakeholders interviewed for this case study find it difficult to exactly know which of these barriers is causing such little participation in long-term cross-border mobility among apprentices. As there is hardly any demand, they are not confronted with these barriers.

Key enablers and disablers at system level

An important potential enabler is funding support for apprentices, such as the Erasmus+ programme. However, funding for employers might still be an issue when they do not receive compensation for lost revenue.

However, in a more practical level some disablers were identified: labour conditions for apprentices are probably different in most other countries than in the Netherlands. The labour contract for apprentices in the Netherlands can be considered as good. Stakeholders that were interviewed, among which social partners, expect for example the salary or status as an employee, to be less in other countries.

Comparability of qualifications and the possibilities of validation of learning outcomes are another important disabler. Alignment of qualifications in VET is still not as good as in Higher Education. Lack of transparency makes it difficult to validate learning outcomes that were obtained outside the Netherlands. Mandatory courses in the Dutch VET curriculum (maths, Dutch language) are also seen as potential disablers.

1.3. Implementation level

1.3.1. Governance (3.1) and policy (3.5)

As mentioned in the previous section there is no specific enabling of disabling policy, neither current policy nor policy in preparation.

According to Westerhuis (2019)²¹ there are many positive 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 of different 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 among the workforce. Firstly, even though all the stakeholders interviewed for this case study generally perceive mobility as beneficial, they argue that the apprenticeship pathway may not be the best way to achieve these benefits. Many of the arguments might as well apply to a VET course, short-term apprenticeships, or internationalisation activities at home (paying attention to internationalisation subjects in class), possibly with the exception of better acquaintance with foreign languages and cultures, as the Erasmus+ Programme Guide observes²². Secondly, Westerhuis raises the question whether apprentices and companies are sensitive to these arguments. Based on the interviews it can be concluded that companies are expected to find the costs of international apprenticeship mobility higher than the benefits.

Due to this lack of demand and because, as stated earlier in the system level, the Ministry of Education sees no (legal) obstacles for mobility in the apprenticeship pathway, there are currently no policies in place in this area and no such schemes have been considered yet by any of the stakeholders interviewed. The Ministry of Education, mobility experts and VET providers mention that there are for example scholarships available such as the Erasmus+ programme, which is not specifically targeted for apprenticeships, but Erasmus+ funds can nonetheless be used for them. Erasmus+, VET providers and trade unions do see some potential in regional partnerships between VET providers and local labour markets, for example the Dutch-German border region. However there are no concrete examples at this point.

1.3.2. Age (3.2)

Overall, most of the stakeholder interviewed consider the average age of VET students to be an obstacle to long-term cross-border apprenticeships, but not

²¹ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

²² Erasmus+ Programme Guide, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-1/mobility-vet-staff_en

necessarily for the same reasons. In general VET students are on average younger than higher education (HE) students, and within the VET population students in the apprenticeship pathway are on average older than the ones in the school-based pathway. Age plays a role for older students, as they might have other (family) responsibilities, which can be a disabler for long term mobility. Due to the average age of apprentices this disabler could be more prevalent in the apprenticeship pathway than in the school-based pathway. Age can also be a disabler for younger students (below 18) as they can be not ready or not allowed to go abroad. Long term cross border mobility is therefore less likely to happen in VET than in HE.

Opinions differ whether or not the age limit of 18 years is an important disabler for long term cross border mobility. NUFFIC figures show that the majority of the mobile VET students are between 19 and 22 years old. Underage students are hardly found in international work placements. One of the reasons given by NUFFIC is that many foreign companies do not accept international students under 18 (NUFFIC, 2017). Also, Westerhuis (2019) sees age as a disabler for long term mobility. However, the stakeholders interviewed point to the fact that most of the mobility, whether in the school-based or the apprenticeship-based pathway, takes place at the highest VET level (EQF Level 4) when students are in their last year(s) of training. By then they are aged 18+. At level 2 most students are aged 16-18 and at level 3 16-19. For the stakeholders interviewed being ready for long term mobility in combination with the length of the training scheme are more important disablers than legal issues considering the 18+ age limit.

Lastly, VET providers, the National VET council and CNV argue that the objectives of an international experience for younger age groups and adult groups are expected to be different. Young students are more inclined to use international mobility to gain general competencies such as international understanding, self-reliance, and planning. Whilst for adults, the objective revolves around upgrading skills. Taking this into account international apprenticeships are more suitable for the latter group.

1.3.3. Employers' attitude (3.3)

Employers' attitude towards apprenticeships is positive. Employers invest significantly in the supervision of apprentices.²³ Trade unions in general terms agree to this, although they see large differences among employers as to how much companies invest in the development of personnel. Mobility for apprentices

²³ Heyma, A., et.al. (2019). *De maatschappelijke kosten en baten van de beroepsbegeleidende leerweg*. Amsterdam: SEO Economisch Onderzoek.

however does not have the strong support of employers. Several stakeholders (ministries, employers' representatives, VET providers, and SBB) argue that employers have not expressed their interest in more international mobility in apprenticeships. According to all the respondents interviewed, employers see a risk for their investment in apprentices associated with mobility. For a Dutch apprentice going abroad (outbound mobility), the risk implies temporary loss of labour and maybe long-term loss of return on investment if the apprentice does not return to the company after mobility. Investments in a foreign student coming temporarily to the Netherlands (inbound mobility), involve a risk when the student returns to his home country, when finally trained and adapted. Employers would only consider investing in mobility on top of investing in normal apprenticeships if they are sure this would generate added value in return. However, for most companies, mobility is not a necessity to sustain business. This is particularly true for SMEs who have little personnel available and limited space for innovation. Probably the lack of need from the side of employers and the possible risk for employers to generate a return on their investment in the apprentices form the strongest disabler. Westerhuis (2019) also addresses the point that in case of mobility the apprentice will be less available for the company without much added value for the company itself.²⁴

1.3.4. Curriculum (3.6)

Traditionally, the school is most important actor in enabling international mobility (providing contacts, guidance, and arrangements). With flexibility in the programmes, schools find space for mobility. In the apprenticeship pathway schools have less flexibility to find space for mobility due to the traditional 4+1 model (days of work and 1 day of school). The influence of employers on the time of the students is bigger. Employers might not be willing to facilitate mobility. And schools need the one day that they have for teaching of mandatory courses such as citizenship class, career guidance, and math. The increasing flexibility in the design of the apprenticeship pathway (other forms than the 4+1 model), mentioned by the Ministry of Education, could be a future stimulating factor for mobility in the apprenticeship pathway.

1.3.5. The role of VET providers (3.10)

²⁴ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, schools are the most important actors in enabling international mobility (providing contacts, guidance, and arrangements). Westerhuis²⁵ sees the school as an important enabler: 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-border 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.

The interviewed VET providers, social partners, apprenticeship representatives (JOB) and national experts find that there are large differences among VET providers in the attention they pay to international activities. Some are frontrunners and some lag behind, which might be due to differences in resources, vision, sectoral added value (e.g. agriculture), and management. The VET providers argue it would be interesting to explore if providers with a large percentage of students in the apprenticeship pathway have less of a focus on international activities. For example, one of the VET providers who engages strongly in international activities argues that there are few apprentices that apply to their school. When the group of apprentices remains small and does not express a need then there is little incentive to change priorities, which are often manifold. One of the VET providers and the VET council add that among the disablers are the criteria of the Inspection of Education. Due to the role of the Inspection schools prioritise topics like examination, citizenship education, language and math over internationalisation, as internationalisation is not one of the inspection criteria.

1.3.6. Employers interest and apprentices and their families' interest (3.12, 3.13, 3.14)

Interviewees from ministries, social partners, VET providers and mobility experts of Nuffic and Erasmus+ share the view that employers do not see a need for cross-border long-term mobility in apprenticeships because there are no direct benefits for them. Additionally, Social partners, VET providers, SBB, Nuffic and JOB (student representative organisation) report that apprentices show little interest in international mobility. Some say that if they would have had the ambition to go abroad, they would have chosen the school-based pathway. However, this has not been tested and respondents do not know if students are aware of the

²⁵ Westerhuis, A. (2019). *How to increase the participation in (long term) mobility of apprentices?* The Netherlands. 's-Hertogenbosch: REFERNET.

opportunities and benefits. Social partners say that apprentices are believed to be more closely connected with their local region, which could mean they are less inclined to have a broader scope (although respondents warn that this is a generalisation). Other obstacles for students mentioned are language, insurance policies, age, and other (family) responsibilities. The VET council believes that a specific focus on apprenticeships is not necessary since tailor made options and switching between pathways are options: if an apprentice would develop the ambition to go abroad, a switch to the school-based pathway could be a possibility to enable this wish.

Some enabling factors were also mentioned by the stakeholders interviewed. First of all, the SBB website provides enough information about companies abroad that receive Dutch VET students. Most of these companies are concentrated in sectors like hospitality and agriculture. Secondly, there are examples of students with specific learning objectives that do go abroad, like Dutch hairdressers going to London or incoming mobility of nurses from Belgium. They specifically go to locations where they can learn something different or new that they cannot learn at home. It is in these last cases that there is an added value to the mobility activity.

Overall, it can be concluded that there is very little incentive for employers, employees and VET providers to facilitate international mobility for apprentices, because the need is simply not there. And when it is present, there are alternatives to facilitate the same objectives.

Key enablers and disablers at implementation level

We distinguish 3 groups of disablers: for employers, students and VET providers.

The most important disabler for employers is the lack of direct benefits associated with the long-term mobility of apprentices. Employers cannot depend on the labour of the apprentice when the apprentice is abroad for mobility. The only benefit employers could have from mobility, the development of specific skills, in general can be solved with the short-term mobility of employees. Secondly, for employers, mobility also involves a risk of a loss on the investment in the apprentice, if the apprentice does not return to the company.

A second group of disablers is related to the apprentices themselves. According to the stakeholders interviewed, not many apprentices seem to have the ambition to go abroad. The argumentation for this requires some nuance. It is believed by most stakeholders that apprentices are mainly focussed on acquiring work experience in their close surroundings, but this hypothesis has not been

tested. Secondly, this might be a matter of circular reasoning: as mobility is not common in apprenticeships, students who have the ambition to go abroad tend to not opt for the apprenticeship pathway, but rather for the school-based pathway.

Age seems to be an important disabler for students: when compared to HE students, most of the VET students are relatively young: being just over 18 years of age can still be considered too young for long-term mobility. On the other hand, apprentices are on average older than students in the school-based pathway. This is because a considerable number of adult workers develop themselves via an apprenticeship. For this group age also plays a role, as they often have other responsibilities, e.g. having a family, that stand in the way of mobility.

Finally, also for VET providers, some important disablers can be mentioned. VET providers themselves have highlighted the absence of need for CBLTMA from both the side of employers as from the side of students. Secondly, VET providers are dealing with the traditional 4+1 day model that is most commonly used. Most opportunities to enable mobility are in the work-based part of the programme, where the cooperation of employers is essential. The school-based part of the programme doesn't leave enough space for long term mobility.

Although the list of disablers is longer than the one of enablers, some enablers were mentioned. All interviewees agree that all legal conditions already exist for 18+ students to learn and work within Europe. Secondly, VET providers are becoming more flexible in applying the curriculum. Thirdly, for acquiring specific competences there is interest in mobility from the side of VET students.

CHAPTER 2. Latest and future developments

2.1.1. Foresight and forward-looking analysis

In terms of policy making and future initiatives, all the stakeholders interviewed for this case study have said that they are not familiar with any initiatives focussing on the long-term mobility of apprentices. The Ministry of Education confirms that there are no plans for introducing a policy on CBLTMA. Interviewees find this in line with the absence of a need expressed by students, employers and VET providers. According to the VET providers, there are other currently other groups that lag behind in mobility, such as lower levels of VET (level 2 and 3). If the goal is to further stimulate cross border mobility, VET providers would consider it more logical to prioritise these groups instead of apprentices.

For VET overall, there is currently a policy strategy to increase mobility amongst VET students. Westerhuis (2019) notes that the minister of Education has published a letter in 2018 to Parliament outlining the Governments policy ambitions regarding the internationalisation of VET and Higher Education. Within this letter the target for 2023 has been formulated for VET. The share of VET students engaged in international activities should grow from 7% to 10% (Ministerie van OCW, 2018)²⁶. It can therefore be concluded that internationalisation is on the agenda receiving attention from various stakeholders. However, this applies to VET as a whole, rather than being focussed on the apprenticeship pathway. The interviewed stakeholders also note that internationalisation still has a long way to go and should be established more strongly before focussing on the apprenticeship pathway. For now, tailor-made solutions and alternatives are available and sufficient. Respondents such as VET providers and social partners find that there might be future scope for more internationalisation in VET apprenticeships, but this is not a priority at the moment and should rather be regarded as a long-term objective.

²⁶ Ministerie van OCW (2018). Kamerbrief over internationalisering mbo en ho. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/06/04/kamerbrief-over-internationalisering-mbo-en-ho>

2.1.2. Recommendations

From the interviews with stakeholders and experts, several recommendations for the stimulation of mobility for apprentices can be formulated.

Focus: Even though interviewees understand the added value of an international experience, all interviewees expressed their doubts on stimulating mobility among apprentices. If the goal of the Dutch Ministry of Education or of the European Commission is to increase mobility in VET, then the interviewees suggested to focus on other groups with low participation in cross-border mobility, such as students in certain sectors that are currently underrepresented or student at lower VET levels.

Several respondents, such as the VET council, social partners and some VET providers, believe that it is employers and students who should determine whether they want to engage with international activities or not. They strongly argue that this is a matter for the market and not for the European Union.

Definition: Generally, all respondents strongly believe that the definition of apprenticeships should be more inclusive in order to truly capture the essence of the Dutch system of two pathways: school-based and apprenticeship-based. A complicating factor here might be the continuous development of the system: there is also a great deal of work-based learning in the school-based pathway, and initiatives for more work-based learning in the school-based pathway are constantly growing. This makes the difference between the two pathways each time less clear. Currently the apprenticeship pathway covers 20% of all VET students. The rest of the students, who do the school-based pathway, also receive great deal of work-based learning.

Alternatives for internationalisation: All interviewed stakeholders agree that VET students benefit from internationalisation. However, it should have an added value for the employer too, particularly in the case of long-term mobility. All the stakeholders interviewed find that apprenticeships are not a suitable means for mobility. They argue that there are also other ways to achieve objectives of internationalisation. Erasmus+, the national VET council, and VET providers suggest using internationalisation activities at home (attention for internationalisation in the classroom), focussing on internationalisation in secondary school (suggested by the employer organisation) and switching from an apprenticeship to the school-based pathway in case of a desire for mobility (suggested by the Ministry of Education and the VET council), and lastly short term mobility (all stakeholders).

Employers' characteristics and needs: social partners argue that differences between sectors and companies should be taken into account. Not all employers will have a similar need for international mobility. Moreover, they argue that when employers do not see an added value in international mobility and an apprentice

goes abroad nonetheless, then it could essentially mean that a student loses out on a valuable experience in a Dutch context during their time abroad. To further promote internationalisation social partners and VET providers recommend focusing on further developing existing relations with companies abroad and run small short-term pilots for apprentices. Existing activities can be further expanded.

Reciprocity and compensation: One of the national mobility experts suggests creating a system of reciprocity, where domestic and overseas employers would mutually exchange apprentices for long-term mobility. This should compensate the employer for the loss of capacity due to the absence of the apprentice. One of the VET providers argues this reciprocity is difficult to arrange since comparability is difficult as well as finding enough apprenticeship spots with the exact same job requirements. He argues that financial compensation for companies to make up for their loss would be a better alternative.

Improve comparability of qualifications: Several VET providers, the VET council and apprenticeship representatives find that the comparability of VET qualifications across Europe should be better facilitated. They notice that despite the EQF, some differences still exist in the level of qualifications in different countries although they have the same EQF level. This hampers the possibilities for recognition of experiences abroad. Several interviewees are positive about the fact that the validation of internships recently has been improved.

Motivation and awareness: The Ministry of Education, student representative organisation (JOB) and VET providers argue that teachers play an important role in motivating students. When teachers are convinced of the added value in mobility themselves, they are more likely to promote international mobility for students in general and possibly mobility for apprentices in particular. According to these stakeholders stimulating internationalisation among teachers, like teacher staff mobility abroad, would help to convince teachers of the added value of internationalisation. Opinions vary on the need for an awareness campaign. The mobility experts of (Erasmus+ and Nuffic) argue that it could be good to raise awareness about internationalisation possibilities amongst the groups that are least likely to engage in international activities. However, the Ministry of Education argues campaigning does not work when the arguments in favour of apprenticeship mobility are not clear.

Research: Social partners, as well as the VET council, VET providers and student representatives (JOB) acknowledge that there is little information available on the extent to what apprentices have a need for international experiences. Research on this would be useful. Additionally, social partners add that research on variations in sectorial needs for international mobility would be valuable.

Conclusions

In these concluding remarks we present the main enablers and disablers for long term cross border mobility of apprentices. We conclude that the disablers outweigh the enablers. We start with the current enablers, followed by disablers that hamper mobility of apprentices. Finally, we present potential enablers that could offer solutions for some of the disablers.

Generally little is known about international mobility specifically of apprentices, due to the fact that this concerns only a small group. Little research has been done about mobility for this group. Stakeholders therefore stated that some of their answers might be speculative.

Current enablers are the following:

- The Netherlands has an open international economy where the revenues of mobility and internationalisation are valued. There are some sectors (e.g. agriculture, tourism, hospitality) and (border) regions that are highly interconnected with international markets.
- There is enough room in law and regulations to make international apprenticeship mobility possible. For example, within Europe migration legislation is not an issue and from outside Europe there appears to be little demand for incoming mobility to the Netherlands.
- There is funding available to support apprentices (Erasmus+ scholarships).
- Existing labour shortages in for example logistics, care, and engineering, could stimulate international mobility.

The main disablers can be found at system and implementation level and can be divided by stakeholder group. There are disablers that are specific to employers, students and VET providers. Generally, none of these parties expressed a demand for long term international mobility of apprentices.

- Employers invest a lot in apprentices. For employers the main disabler is that they cannot make use of the apprentices when they are abroad. Employers count on apprentices being present in the workplace 60 to 80% of their total training period.
- This is particularly true for SMEs, which hire the largest percentage of apprentices.
- There is no direct revenue for employers from long-term mobility of apprentices.
- There is a risk that the apprentice leaves the company, or when is it a foreign student, that he returns to his country.
- There are some limitations in terms of quality assurance regarding the curricula and examination. Comparability of qualifications and validation of

learning outcomes is still limited, although there have been improvements regarding the validation of internships. The mandatory Dutch language components as well as maths components of the Dutch VET curriculum might act as a barrier for incoming students. In the same way, Dutch VET students need to speak a foreign language before they can consider undertaking an apprenticeship abroad, and foreign language teaching is not a major component of the Dutch VET curriculum for apprentices.

- Mobility abroad for apprentices is still too rare to create any kind of attraction among most apprentices.
- For VET providers there is no need to invest in long-term mobility in apprenticeships for two reasons: firstly both students and employers express no need for it; secondly for apprentices who do wish to go abroad, a switch to the school-based pathway remains open as a possibility.
- The lack of time and flexibility for education institutes that simply have other priorities. To organize international apprenticeship mobility, it needs to be feasible in terms of time, resources, and other obligations.
- Generally, apprentices are a group that is not well known or represented. Many of the parties are not aware of what this group wants. This is due to the fact that this group is more self-reliant and disconnected from education institutions.
- A programme directed at the international mobility of apprentices would be vulnerable, as the number of possible work placements in the apprenticeship pathway is subject to changes in the economic climate.

Potential enablers are the following.

- The role of teachers and internship coordinators as motivators.
- Awareness raising might stimulate the creation of a need amongst apprentices.
- The choice for an apprenticeship or a school-based pathway could be made later during the study. This would allow students to opt for mobility and then consider an apprenticeship abroad. It would make them less bound to their Dutch employer.
- A stimulating factor might be the use of existing relationships with companies based on school-based internships, to make it easier for apprenticeship relationships to be established.
- Compensation for employers for the loss of capacity when an apprentice goes abroad through the mutual exchange of apprentices or by offering financial compensation.
- According to several stakeholders like the VET providers, the threshold for apprentices to go abroad is high because of the duration of the work-based part within an apprenticeship. To reach the goals of internationalisation, other forms are recommended VET providers and one of the student mobility experts, like shorter duration mobility, for younger apprentices travelling in groups, or under guidance.

Annex 1. Interview partners

CNV (labour union)

Erasmus+

FNV (labour union)

JOB (students representative organisation)

Mbo Raad (VET providers association / VET Council)

Ministry of Education

Ministry of Social Welfare and Employment

Nuffic

ROC Tilburg

SBB (VET-industry cooperation organisation)

VNO-NCW/MKB Nederland (employers)

Wellant

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