

Summary Monitor Associate degree 2006-2010

Associate degree programmes (ADs) were introduced in the Netherlands in the academic year 2006-2007. ADs are connected to a Bachelor course and last only two years. After completing an AD one receives an Associate degree, which prepares people to enter a (related) Bachelor course halfway through or to directly enter into employment. In behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, SEO Economic Research monitored the first pilots of ADs for a period of four years. By doing so, the following five research questions have been answered.

1. What attracts people to Associate degree programmes and is the target group reached?

ADs are appealing because of their short duration, its official degree and the possibility to continue on to a related Bachelor course. Since ADs are part of a Bachelor course and thereby facilitate a transfer, it also appears to encourage people to obtain a Bachelor degree after completing an AD. About two-fifth of the AD graduates who continued on to a Bachelor course said that they would not have opted for an AD without that possibility. Graduates who directly entered into employment did not experience any disadvantages of the AD being part of the Bachelor course. Although students are very satisfied with their AD, they have no clear image of potential career opportunities after graduation. Institutions which offer ADs should invest in increasing this awareness.

The number of AD students has increased from approximately 450 in academic year 2006-2007 to over 2,200 in 2009-2010, but there is certainly room for expansion. This is implied by the fact that ADs are rather unknown among potential target groups such as vocational college students. ADs exist in full-time, part-time and dual format, from which the latter two attract about half of all students. The large percentage of part-timers is due to the majority of AD students belonging to the intended target group: about half are employed and about a quarter started immediately after completing secondary vocational education.

2. Do Associate degree programmes affect participation in higher education and Bachelor courses in particular?

ADs enable greater participation in higher vocational education. 50% of the students planned to do a Bachelor course, but decided to do an AD instead. Yet, after graduation, 50% of all AD students continues on to a Bachelor course. As a result, the number of Bachelor students remains roughly constant.

A relevant but unanswered question is whether AD students who initially planned to do a Bachelor course would have completed it without obtaining an Associate degree first. After all, students choose what best fits their personal situation. This also explains why the drop-out rate from ADs is practically the same as from related Bachelor courses. Drop-outs actually have a possibility to switch from one to the other. Moreover, it is clear that the connection between ADs and Bachelor courses is important for participation and completion of higher vocational education in the Netherlands.

3. How does the transfer to Bachelor courses work out?

The strong connection between ADs and Bachelor courses causes a smooth transition from the Associate degree to the Bachelor level and vice versa for Bachelor dropouts. After all, ADs are usually part of a Bachelor course and have a comparable difficulty level. During the first years a large amount of AD students were educated alongside Bachelor students. Just a limited, though growing number of students, followed a distinct programme.

4. What is the labour market position of Associate degree graduates?

After graduation it is not difficult for AD students to find a job they like. Their starting salaries lie generally mid-way between that of graduates from secondary vocational education and Bachelor courses. AD students also seem to create their own positions on the job market. However, they work more often on temporary contracts than Bachelor graduates. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that ADs are not well known. Only a fraction of employers in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have knowledge of ADs. Yet, about a third of the SMEs indicate they need employees with a degree between the secondary vocational diploma and a Bachelor's degree. In companies with over 20 employees, this even amounts to almost 40 per cent, especially with regards to technicians and middle management. Nevertheless, employers are still hesitant to upgrade their own employees with the AD.

According to students who followed a dual or part-time AD, the AD made them more productive at their jobs. For 50% of these students, their increased productivity was rewarded with a promotion directly after graduation. For the other half, their expectations of future promotion increased considerably. Employers are equally pleased with what AD students have learned, both in terms of theory and practical knowledge.

5. How do institutions which offer Associate degree programmes cooperate with vocational education colleges and potential employers?

The intensity with which institutions that offer ADs cooperate with vocational education colleges and potential employers varies greatly. Institutions that have a high influx of secondary vocational education students generally cooperate intensely with regional training centres (ROCs). Those that concentrate on working people, however, hardly cooperate with vocational education colleges. If there is cooperation, it predominantly concerns the transition of graduates from vocational college to the Associate degree. Nearly all higher education institutions are in contact with potential employers of AD graduates. In case of ADs in dual and part-time format, contact with employers is even more intensive. Potential employers have some influence on the AD curriculum, and there is regular consultation about the content of the practical part of the study programme. Agreements with ROCs and potential employers are, however, not always formalised. When an institution applied for an AD at the Ministry, initial contacts were established. However, it was often unclear whether this concerned long-term or merely formal support for the request. Once the AD loses its pilot status, contacts with ROCs and potential employers are expected to intensify. The definite adoption of the AD into the higher vocational education segment will provide stability to jointly invest in the further development of the AD.

Four years of data collection

The pilots of ADs in the Netherlands have been monitored from 2006 until 2010. During this period SEO Economic Research conducted more than 20 surveys among students, graduates, potential students and potential employers. Moreover, in-depth interviews were held with training coordinators on ADs and with employers of AD students. Finally, registration data held by the education implementation service (DUO) was analysed as well.

During the monitoring period ADs were still a relatively new concept among all other education options. Because of the pilot status, the opportunity for in-depth analyses was sometimes limited. For instance, the number of graduates was still small. Nevertheless, the data obtained suggests that the AD is a good investment. It may last only half a Bachelor course, but it certainly does not produce half-baked graduates.