Chapter 8

Work–Based Learning (WBL) in Higher Education and Lifelong Learning in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, developments and issues in the Netherlands with regard to work-based learning (WBL) and its relevance for higher professional education (HPE) and lifelong learning (LLL) are discussed. While traditionally in LLL the emphasis was on formal and non-formal learning in organized settings (adult education), nowadays there is growing awareness of the importance of informal LLL in the workplace. Different and more intensive patterns of interaction between companies and HPE are being developed to improve the connection between learning in education and in the workplace. There are steps towards an effective pedagogy of WBL as employers and HPE strive for high-quality outcomes. As a final point, the authors discuss the recent developments with regard to accreditation of prior learning as a way to raise the qualification levels of the working population.

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF WBL

In this chapter developments and issues with regard to work based learning (WBL) and its relevance for higher professional education (HPE) and lifelong learning (LLL) in the Netherlands will be discussed. Higher Education in the Netherlands has two main strands: an academic one (universities) and a professional one: HPE (delivered at Universities of Applied Sciences UAS). Although workplace learning
in internships or traineeships is traditionally included in academic HE this is mainly as a separate part or planned after the first stage of formal education (ie medical of juridical specialisation). The main curriculum is hardly being modified to include workplace experiential learning or make learning more relevant to the workplace. That is why this contribution is focussing on HPE and LLL.

Whereas initial professional education in the Netherlands has been – and still is - largely school-based, WBL has become a considerable part of the curriculum, both in professional bachelor and master courses. In recent years a shift has been taking place in senior secondary vocational as well as higher professional education towards competence-based learning. In this approach, practical employment experience occupies a central role, and the proportion of course time spent working is therefore increasing. The value and quality of workplace learning in HPE remains a topic of heavy debate and much experimentation. The discussion revolves around four main themes (Onstenk, 2017). Firstly, there are high expectations connected to WBL with regard to learning effects and outcomes, but like any learning these are not always nor automatically accomplished. Secondly, there are steps towards an effective pedagogy of WBL, but a full-blown pedagogy is still lacking. Thirdly, new content and didactics at HPE institutions, as well as different and more intensive patterns of interaction between companies and vocational schools are being developed to improve the connection between learning in university and in the workplace. Fourthly, working together, employers and HPE institutions are striving for high-quality outcomes. The enhancement of the quality of workplace learning is sought for in many forms. Although formal requirements with respect to quality are established and controlled, two serious ‘sticky’ problems remain and are frequently discussed in the Netherlands: the quality of workplace learning itself with regard to content, guidance and assessment, and the quality of the connections between work-based and school-based learning (Onstenk 2004; 2017). There is growing cooperation and mutual commitment between UAS and companies. However, organisational problems related to the growth of work-based learning and finding and steering workplace learning possibilities keep recurring.

With regard to LLL a distinction can be made between learning in organized settings (courses, part time VET or HE bachelor or master programs) and informal learning in the workplace. Informal learning at work involves the processes by which people learn in their workplaces outside the realms of formal education and training. While traditionally the emphasis in the Netherlands was on organized settings, nowadays there is growing awareness of the importance of lifelong learning for both low and high level educated employees and professionals.
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