



NVAO  NETHERLANDS

MANAGING PRACTICE: WORK- BASED LEARNING IN ASSOCIATE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

MARCH 2026



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1 Foreword

Associate degree education is a relatively recent development within our higher education system. Unlike other parts of higher education, it is also still expanding. It therefore clearly meets a genuine need.

Its short history means that all parties involved, institutions, lecturers, representatives from the professional field and students, are still in a pioneering phase. This is inevitable, and both stimulating and challenging. What is the value of an associate degree diploma within organisations that are not yet familiar with it? What exact final attainment level do we expect? How much responsibility should be placed on students in arranging an appropriate work placement? These are logical questions that cannot all be resolved in advance at the drawing board. An evolving practice is also essential.

This thematic analysis of work-based learning in associate degree education provides a valuable picture of this evolving practice. It describes the triangle of student, programme and workplace, and explores the challenges that emerge within it. The report makes a useful contribution to strengthening quality assurance within institutions. It also provides guidance for panel members: what should they pay attention to?

This report demonstrates the value of thematic analyses conducted by NVAO. It brings together themes emerging from individual reports and explores them in greater depth through discussions with various stakeholders, including those who are not automatically involved in accreditation processes. In this way, it can provide an impetus for all associate degree programmes.

Pioneering goes hand in hand with learning and active reflection. I would therefore like to thank all discussion partners who contributed to the preparation of this report. We encountered an open and learning-oriented culture, which inspires confidence in the future.

I wish you an inspiring and enjoyable read.

Dr Arnold Jonk
Chair of NVAO

2 Executive summary

A substantial part of higher education takes place in the workplace. Work-based learning generally occurs within the triangle of programme, student and workplace, while higher education institutions remain ultimately responsible for the quality of education provided. In this thematic analysis of quality assurance, the Netherlands-Flanders Accreditation Organisation, Netherlands division (NVAO Netherlands), explores how work-based learning has been designed and safeguarded within associate degree (Ad) programmes since these programmes acquired independent status in 2018.

The study combines a content analysis of 44 accreditation review reports with focus group discussions involving programme managers, students, representatives from the professional field and chairs of review panels. Based on the understanding that work-based learning can take different forms, including placements and practice-based assignments, the study examined challenges and good practices within full-time, part-time and dual-track variants of publicly funded and privately funded programmes.

2.1. An ambivalent picture

The analysis of reports and focus groups presents an ambivalent picture. In many cases, work-based learning functions well. Programmes and the professional field jointly shape work-based learning, and it supports students in their professional preparation and development. At the same time, stakeholders within the triangle experience bottlenecks in practice.

Individual challenges in practice

Alignment with the professional field regarding the intended learning outcomes generally functions well, and professional advisory committees play an important role in ensuring that the curriculum is aligned with professional practice. At the same time, the place of work-based learning within the curriculum varies between programmes. Programmes invest considerable effort in making arrangements with the professional field, although the extent to which collaboration is structurally embedded differs.

Particularly in full-time and dual-track variants, relationships within the triangle are generally strong. Nevertheless, organising a placement or workplace often remains an individual process, involving challenges related to finding a suitable placement or workplace, coordination within the triangle, and defining learning tasks. Programme managers perceive a tension between achieving the intended learning outcomes and allowing students individual autonomy, while students and workplace supervisors are uncertain whether the delineation of learning tasks is sufficient.

Risks in part-time programmes

Programmes invest considerable effort at the outset in making agreements about work-based learning, sharing knowledge, and clarifying what is expected from students and supervisors. Nevertheless, coordination between the programme, the workplace and the student is sometimes limited. In part-time programmes in particular, responsibility for this coordination often rests with the student, creating risks of insufficient supervision, dropout and study delay. In addition, workplace learning in several privately funded part-time programmes is perceived as relatively disconnected from learning within the programme itself.

2.2. Concrete steps

- 1. Create clarity in advance regarding expectations and the associate degree level.** As a programme and professional field, work with a clear, sector-specific professional profile for the associate degree, and make learning outcomes, expectations and responsibilities explicit prior to the work-based learning period.

2. **Strengthen the triangle in practice and focus on clearly defined learning tasks.** From the programme side, appoint a single contact person for each student, invest in ongoing mutual coordination, and ensure that the workplace provides expert supervision.
3. **Pay additional attention to part-time variants.** As a programme, make clear agreements with workplaces and carefully monitor the learning process. Provide part-time students with more guidance in order to prevent study delay and dropout.
4. **Embed work-based learning structurally.** As a programme, monitor students' individual development in the placement or workplace setting, oversee the quality of placements and workplaces, and provide alternatives where placements or workplaces prove inadequate. As a review panel, actively question the programme, students and representatives from the professional field about these aspects and record the findings in the panel's advisory report.

The three recommendations relating to quality assurance extend beyond associate degree programmes and are relevant to all higher education programmes in which work-based learning plays an important role.

3 Introduction

The demand for professionals is increasing, and a substantial part of higher education programmes takes place in the workplace. Work-based learning is embedded in an organised sequence of practical learning situations, in which students independently practise and carry out increasingly complex and authentic professional tasks. During work-based learning, students learn from and through interaction with professionals in the workplace, in close coordination with lecturers from the higher education institution (NVAO, 2022).

In this thematic analysis of quality assurance, NVAO Netherlands explores how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded within associate degree (Ad) programmes. Associate degree programmes were specifically selected because of their practice-oriented character and the important role of work-based learning in education. Associate degree programmes are two-year professionally oriented higher education programmes at qualification level 5, which have held independent status within Dutch higher education since 1 January 2018.

Drawing on accreditation review reports and focus groups with programme managers, students, representatives from the professional field and chairs of review panels, this analysis identifies what stakeholders regard as good practices and how improvements can be realised.

Research aim and research question

Work-based learning generally takes place within the triangle of programme, student and workplace. It is shaped through dialogue, with the challenge being to connect the different perspectives and interests in such a way that it becomes clear what the student can do in the workplace in order to learn what needs to be learned (NVAO, 2022, p. 6; Timmermans & Kroeze, 2021). Higher education institutions nevertheless remain ultimately responsible for the quality of education, while they do not automatically have oversight of learning taking place outside the walls of the institution (Mulder, 2023; Education Council, 2024).

When assessing the quality of a programme, a review panel examines whether the programme has created a learning environment that aligns with the intended learning outcomes and enables students to achieve those outcomes. The objectives of the programme must correspond with the requirements of the professional field and with relevant statutory regulations or professional requirements. The accreditation framework does not specifically prescribe the extent to which, or the way in which, review panels should pay attention to work-based learning.

To provide programmes and review panels with guidance in the development and assessment of programmes that partly take place in the workplace, NVAO Netherlands published the *Guide to Work-Based Learning* together with experts in 2022 (NVAO, 2022). However, it remains unclear whether programmes and review panels have sufficient guidance in shaping and safeguarding work-based learning. The Education Council and the Inspectorate of Education observe that programmes invest heavily in maintaining good relationships and contact with the professional field, but exercise only limited control over learning in practice (Inspectorate of Education, 2025a, 2026; Education Council, 2024).

In order to determine to what extent work-based learning requires specific attention within educational quality assurance, this thematic analysis of quality assurance addresses the following research question: ***How is work-based learning organised within associate degree programmes, and how is its quality safeguarded?***

Operationalisation

Through a qualitative analysis of 44 accreditation review reports relating to assessments of new and existing programmes since 2018, and eight homogeneous focus groups involving programme managers, students, representatives from the professional field and chairs of review panels, this thematic analysis examines how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded within associate degree programmes.

Based on the understanding that programmes should provide an appropriate learning environment enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, NVAO adopts a broad interpretation of work-based learning as education in and for professional practice. Students may prepare for professional practice through placements, activities carried out within their employment, and projects and assignments both within the educational institution and in professional practice. Learning in the workplace and learning within the programme may take place separately, elements of the workplace situation may be brought into the educational setting and vice versa, or a hybrid learning environment may emerge that combines characteristics of both education and professional practice (Bouw, 2021; Bronneman-Helmers, 2006; NVAO, 2022).

This analysis explores how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded within publicly funded and privately funded programmes, across different programme variants and combinations of variants. In dual-track variants, participation in education alternates with professional practice related to that education. The university of applied sciences, the student and the organisation sign a tripartite agreement governing the professional practice component, which specifies, among other things, the knowledge, understanding and skills the student is expected to acquire and how supervision will be organised. In full-time and part-time variants, there is no mandatory tripartite agreement with an employer. In full-time variants, professional practice is often “brought into the institution”, while students also undertake placements. In part-time variants, students may generally undertake placements, but it is often assumed that they already have a workplace in which they can achieve their learning outcomes. Programmes may impose requirements on such workplaces (Higher Education and Research Act, n.d.; ICN Working Group, 2024).

The majority of the total offering of 277 associate degree programmes in 2024 consisted exclusively of part-time variants, followed by combinations of full-time and part-time variants and exclusively full-time variants. The number of programmes offered in a dual-track variant was considerably lower. Most programmes are publicly funded (84% in 2024); privately funded programmes are primarily offered part-time within the economics sector (Inspectorate of Education, 2025b).

The question of how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded has been operationalised through the following sub-questions:

- 1) How is work-based learning organised within programmes, what bottlenecks do stakeholders within the triangle encounter, and which strategies and good practices do they employ?
- 2) How is the safeguarding of work-based learning organised within programmes and accreditation reviews, what bottlenecks do stakeholders within the triangle encounter, and which strategies and good practices do they employ?
- 3) To what extent do similarities and differences emerge between the various programme variants and combinations of variants (full-time/part-time/dual-track)?

In practice, the coordination between programme, student and workplace differs considerably. This applies to the design of the curriculum, the preparation of the individual learning pathway, the supervision and assessment of students, and the improvement of the quality of work-based learning. Following the *Guide to Work-Based Learning* (NVAO, 2022), this thematic analysis of quality assurance follows this process and describes in Chapters 4 and 5 how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded at different stages.

4 Organisation of collaboration within the programme

Embedding work-based learning effectively within the curriculum requires continuous coordination between the programme, the professional field and the specific workplace. Relationships between programmes and the professional field generally operate through at least two hierarchically ordered levels. Programme management often takes an integrated view of relations with the professional field and workplace partners, while lecturers and coordinators maintain a direct relationship with the workplace or placement setting.

Coordination between associate degree programmes and the professional field generally functions well. Chairs of review panels value the practice-oriented nature of these programmes, and accreditation review reports show that associate degree programmes are developing into independent programmes that prepare professionals for positions “at the intersection of operational and tactical levels within organisations”. Nevertheless, the position of work-based learning within the programme differs, as do programme managers’ views of the relationship with the professional field. In most cases, students encounter multiple forms of practice and workplace contexts. However, part-time programmes offered by private providers also regard work-based learning as relatively separate from the educational programme itself. In such cases, the programme prepares students for further development in professional practice, and work-based learning is less of a shared process.

Focus group discussions and accreditation review reports present a varied picture of the relationship between the programme and the actual workplace. Alongside intensive and structurally embedded involvement of professional practice partners, looser forms of collaboration also occur, or students themselves are responsible for arranging a placement or workplace. In addition, several focus groups indicated that, within large organisations, a distinction exists between the programme’s relationship with management and its relationship with the operational work floor. Agreements made at management level do not always align with practice in the workplace.

4.1 Organisation of the programme

Accreditation review reports and focus groups with chairs of review panels, representatives from the professional field and programme managers indicate that coordination with the professional field regarding the intended learning outcomes (standard 1 of the accreditation framework) generally functions well. The intended learning outcomes align with the level and orientation of associate degree programmes and correspond with the expectations of the professional field and the discipline. For example, the graduate profile for IT programmes has been further developed, and professional products within various domains have become more strongly oriented towards regional practice. Programme managers and chairs of review panels emphasise the value of jointly working towards clear professional profiles and national occupational profiles. They explicitly identify this as a good practice.

At the same time, programme managers and representatives from the professional field experience specific bottlenecks, such as limited familiarity with level 5 professional roles in sectors such as healthcare, welfare and education. For programmes with broader graduate profiles, such as those in healthcare, the financial sector and commercial economics, review panels sometimes advise programmes to seek more specific alignment with the regional professional field and to make more active use of professional advisory committees. In addition, focus groups reveal that programme managers experience the current regulations concerning macro-efficiency planning when launching part-time, full-time and dual-track variants as restrictive, since labour market demand is difficult to specify for each variant and associate degree programmes require flexibility.

Professional advisory committees

Professional advisory committees, also referred to as professional field committees, play an

important role in aligning programmes with the professional field. According to accreditation review reports, these committees ensure alignment with the labour market “at a strategic and tactical level”, contribute current market developments to the final qualifications, and help establish the professional profile of programmes. Committees may also contribute to the design of placement assignments and assessment frameworks, as well as to the content of thematic components. Members of professional advisory committees sometimes also serve on curriculum committees.

Professional advisory committees include representatives from the (regional) professional field, often supplemented by alumni of the programme. However, representation from organisations providing placements or workplaces is limited. The focus groups included professional practice partners who were strongly involved in the associate degree programme and participated in the professional advisory committee on that basis. Nevertheless, several accreditation review reports recommend strengthening the role of employers within these committees.

Multiple stakeholders involved

In addition to the professional advisory committee, various parties from the professional field are involved in the design and adaptation of programmes. Programmes and the professional field within a specific domain, for example, often consult at national level regarding competencies and alignment with current developments. In sectors such as the social domain and education, programmes collaborate closely with established practice partners. Programmes build on existing relationships developed for bachelor’s programmes and, according to chairs of review panels and programme managers, there is now greater convergence towards national profiles.

Universities of applied sciences often have agreements with larger organisations regarding dual-track workplaces or placements for students from several associate degree and bachelor’s programmes. Within the pedagogical and educational domain, for example, the relationship is organised at institutional level and further specified through the programme’s own professional advisory committee:

“The panel considers it a strength that the programme aligns its graduate profile closely with the professional field at both strategic and operational level. At strategic level, the institution-wide professional advisory committee – comprising senior representatives from education and childcare organisations – discusses how the university of applied sciences’ programmes can respond to developments within the professional field and the region. At operational level, regular consultations take place with the programme’s own professional advisory committee, where discussions focus on the breadth and depth of the graduate profile and its alignment with the regional professional field. In this way, the programme demonstrates awareness of the needs of the professional field and of the possible need to adapt the curriculum to professional practice. For example, discussions are held about the fact that organisational job classification structures do not yet provide room for associate degree-level positions and corresponding remuneration” (accreditation review report).

Programmes themselves also frequently organise broader networking events. Programmes in entrepreneurship, for example, may have a network of entrepreneurs who coach students in setting up their own businesses. In addition, focus groups with programme managers and accreditation review reports indicate that lecturers’ professional networks and practical experience play an important role in curriculum development and in ensuring alignment between the programme and developments in professional practice.

Several publicly funded universities of applied sciences also have placement offices that operate at faculty or domain level and play an operational role in arranging placements and coordinating agreements relating to dual-track learning.

4.2 Organisation collaboration in placements and workplaces

Programmes invest heavily in structural partnerships with organisations in the professional field, but organising a workplace also remains an individual process in which students are expected to exercise self-direction within the triangle of programme, student and workplace. The *Guide to Work-Based Learning* outlines a quadrant ranging from intensive to less intensive collaboration and from learning situations specifically designed for learning to authentic workplace situations (NVAO, 2022). All variants within this quadrant are reflected in the accreditation review reports of associate degree programmes, revealing a wide variety of forms of collaboration.

Differences between variants in autonomy, authenticity and collaboration

The organisation of work-based learning differs between programme variants. At several publicly funded institutions, students from different variants of the same programme attend classes together. Dual-track and part-time students often bring professional contacts and practice-based assignments into the classroom for full-time students. Even where students follow the same educational activities, differences remain between variants regarding the degree of self-direction expected from students when arranging a placement or workplace, the authenticity of the learning situations, and the intensity of collaboration between the programme and the professional field.

In full-time programmes, learning situations are often less authentic, and there is usually a gradual progression in the level of independence expected from students. There is considerable variation between programmes in the way work-based learning is organised, but the first year often focuses on introducing students to professional practice and preparing them for it, with elements of professional practice also being “brought into the institution”. In the full-time *Tailor Professional* programme, for example, lecturers fulfil the role of workplace mentors. In programmes within domains such as healthcare or education, students sometimes begin a longitudinal placement already in the first year, spending one or more days per week becoming familiar with professional practice. In the second year, full-time students often arrange their own final placement, with programmes providing support where necessary. Programme managers indicated in focus groups that substantial investment is made in relationships with the professional field, although the degree to which collaboration is structurally embedded differs by professional domain. Universities of applied sciences, for example, often already maintain intensive partnerships with the education and healthcare sectors, whereas collaboration in fields such as IT is less formally organised.

In dual-track and part-time variants, students are generally expected to demonstrate a relatively high degree of independence in the workplace from the start of the programme, with the aim of further professional development. In several part-time and dual-track variants, workplace learning accounts for more than 50% of the total study load.

According to programme managers, the background students bring to dual-track programmes and the level of independence expected from them can vary considerably. Students may develop within an existing position at their employer, but organisations also create dedicated training positions to prepare new employees. Dual-track programmes are often based on intensive and structurally embedded partnerships between programmes and regional employers, formalised through a tripartite agreement at the start of the programme. Programme managers nevertheless observe that workplace learning within dual-track programmes sometimes differs little from that in part-time programmes.

Several part-time programmes invest in structural partnerships with the professional field and collaborate with companies on a demand-driven basis through in-company training pathways. However, collaboration between the programme and the professional field is not standard practice. It is often assumed that students already have a workplace in which the required learning tasks can be achieved. Particularly among private providers of part-time programmes,

workplace learning remains relatively disconnected from education provided within the university of applied sciences.

'We assume that the student has a relevant workplace. In the first year this is not really essential, but at a later stage a workplace genuinely becomes necessary. The assignments and assessments are based on the workplace. The student is therefore taught knowledge and skills that have been discussed in advance with the professional field: 'What does the student currently need in the workplace?' Certain requirements emerge from that discussion. We then try to incorporate these into the module, the programme and the assignments. The student subsequently works on these within the workplace" (focus group, programme manager, part-time programme).

In the design of programmes, collaboration within the triangle therefore differs between variants, with part-time students in particular expected to take responsibility for managing their own learning process and ensuring coordination. According to programme managers, part-time students entering an associate degree programme encounter a different role and different responsibilities. Students formulate goals for further professional development that align with both the workplace and their personal development.

This emphasis on autonomy is particularly visible among part-time and dual-track students. Partly based on the assumption that part-time and dual-track students achieve a substantial proportion of their learning outcomes in professional practice, these variants often work with flexible learning pathways and the possibility of assessment independent of the learning route followed. This approach can also be observed within full-time education, although to a lesser extent. Across all variants, students themselves remain responsible for acquiring and demonstrating their learning outcomes, including through the compilation of a portfolio containing supporting evidence.

4.3 Bottlenecks and good practices in organising work-based learning

Programme managers indicate that finding a suitable placement or workplace generally proceeds well. Nevertheless, it remains a matter of tailoring and coordination, in which programmes can provide support, although success is not always guaranteed. "If you had spent a long time searching, you had less time available for your assignment. It was still your own responsibility to solve that problem. {...} Things can sometimes go wrong" (full-time student, focus group). In some cases, there is competition within organisations because they provide placements for students from multiple programmes. Associate degree students sometimes have to "fight for their place" within organisations because the professional field is not yet sufficiently familiar with their knowledge and skills. In addition, several programme managers of dual-track variants indicated that demand for training places within organisations far exceeds supply.

"They have to find a workplace for the dual-track route, and very often they simply cannot. As programme coordinator, I receive many emails from students saying, 'We can't find anything.' So we try to facilitate that. We also have agreements with organisations in the professional field that are desperate for staff, but even then things proceed with difficulty. An organisation can handle a maximum of four or five places. That is really the limit, while I have around 60 or 70 students who would like such a place" (focus group, programme manager, dual-track programme).

In their contacts with large organisations, programme managers of dual-track and part-time variants also experience that, although communication at management and HR level functions well and coordinators organise work-based learning across the organisation, the operational work floor is often less enthusiastic. There is little time available for supervision, and part-time students cannot easily be spared from the work process.

When a part-time student does not have access to a relevant workplace, the student and the programme must jointly look for solutions. This gives rise to a tension: organisations seek candidates who are already qualified for the role, while programmes require a relevant workplace in which the student is already performing that role. In addition, students are not always given the opportunity to “develop away” from their current position within the workplace.

Good practices and quality assurance

Prior to placements or workplace learning, programmes seek to strengthen the triangle by engaging in dialogue and clearly communicating what is expected from the educational perspective. Programme managers indicate that they monitor experiences within organisations that function as placement providers or workplaces.

If students have already started the programme but are unable to arrange a placement or workplace, programmes often explore possibilities within their own networks. Part-time students who are unable to develop further in their current role benefit considerably from each other's professional networks when searching for a new workplace, or may sometimes gain the necessary practical experience through several short-term placements. Responsibility nevertheless largely rests with the student, including in contacts with the workplace or placement organisation.

Programmes invest heavily in clarifying in advance what students require from a suitable workplace or placement, for example by organising information sessions or training activities for workplace supervisors on the intended learning outcomes. Particularly where organisations strategically decide to function as placement providers, it is important that supervisors on the work floor are properly involved and speak the same “language” as the educational institution, in order to prevent misunderstandings regarding the assignments to be carried out.

In dual-track variants, the tripartite agreement plays an important role in safeguarding work-based learning. At the start of workplace learning, concrete agreements are established between the programme, the student and the workplace regarding expectations surrounding the student's learning process and supervision. For example, students are given time and space within the workplace to work on assignments.

In programmes offered as full-time or part-time variants, responsibility for making sound agreements and preparing placement plans rests more heavily with students from the outset. Students participating in focus group discussions indicated that there is not always direct contact between the programme and the placement or workplace. At the same time, programmes offered part-time often impose requirements on the workplace, the workplace supervisor and, in some cases, the student as well. Several programme managers indicated that they pay particular attention to commitment and capacity for development. Paradoxically, this may also make the programme less accessible to individuals wishing to retrain for a different profession.

5 Collaboration and quality assurance in practice

Committed and professional lecturers and workplace supervisors with a sound understanding of the intended learning outcomes and the programme level are essential conditions for effective work-based learning. In many cases, work-based learning functions well, but situations also occur in which these conditions are not adequately in place, resulting in study delay or dropout among students. Insufficient involvement may arise both from the programme side and from the workplace. Bottlenecks frequently emerge in the concretisation of learning tasks or in the planning of activities. Particularly within part-time programmes, students may also become “overwhelmed”, with too much being expected in terms of self-direction because they receive limited support from both the programme and the workplace.

5.1 Positive experiences in practice

“That student has two coaches. There is a workplace supervisor who provides coaching, and a student coach who is also involved in the student’s work” (focus group, manager, dual-track programme).

Good coordination within the triangle forms the basis for successful workplace learning. Students, representatives from the professional field and programme managers experience that students undergo strong professional development when communication within the triangle functions well and both the lecturer and the workplace supervisor have a clear understanding of the intended learning outcomes and the student’s development. Students indicate that a workplace supervisor who is familiar with the programme stimulates progress and helps coordinate matters within the organisation. Workplace supervisors often actively contribute to the concretisation of assignments and create space for students to take responsibility and carry out these assignments. Students are frequently given trust and opportunities to develop more broadly and to gain work experience beyond their own department. The triangle generally functions particularly well within dual-track variants, and especially in dual-track and part-time variants it emerges that learning assignments are authentic and valuable to the organisation.

In their contact with the programme, students value the return days and the guidance provided by the programme. Students experience contact with fellow students and learning from each other’s professional practice as positive. Students in part-time and dual-track variants in particular perceive the programme as stimulating their professional development. Programme managers report that dual-track students are critical sparring partners and at the same time very satisfied with mutual exchange, knowledge sharing and the practical component of the programme.

Students from different variants also appreciate the modular structure and the degree of freedom and flexibility many programmes provide for making individual choices and taking responsibility for the sequencing and pace of learning within both the programme and the workplace.

5.2 Bottlenecks and strategies in work-based learning

Direction and coordination of authentic learning tasks

“If you look at those learning tasks [...] The learning task that you have also developed together with the professional field is something we struggle with as well. Of course, we can think very carefully ourselves about what the professional field needs, or what the student needs, but if that comes solely from us, then such a learning task naturally becomes very one-sided” (programme manager, part-time programme).

Bottlenecks relating to work-based learning particularly emerge in the concretisation of learning outcomes into learning tasks within a student’s own specific environment. Programme managers perceive a tension between achieving the intended learning outcomes and allowing students the

individual freedom to find their own way in practice. At the same time, students and workplace supervisors are often uncertain whether the assignments they agree upon actually meet the required standards.

Concretising authentic learning tasks and ensuring that students encounter specific aspects of professional practice is therefore often a shared responsibility.

“Those workplace supervisors really need to know the learning outcomes. They need to understand: ‘What exactly is this student supposed to learn here?’ They also need to ensure that the programme, the activities they offer, or the project a student is working on aligns with the learning outcomes. I sometimes wonder whether this is always organised properly, because in review panels we rarely speak to those supervisors directly” (focus group discussion, chair of review panel).

Programme managers want to give students and organisations room to shape assignments in practice themselves. In this respect, they see an important role for the workplace. They also acknowledge that this does not always function well in practice and recognise a responsibility on the programme side for safeguarding the achievement of the learning outcomes. Working with a placement plan and an assessment by the placement office, in which it is checked whether workplace tasks align with the intended learning outcomes, can provide guidance at the outset.

Students and organisations providing placements or workplaces indicate that they would like greater clarity from programmes about whether the practical concretisation of assignments is adequate. For short-term placements and assignments, such as projects in which several students contribute to events, a clearly formulated assignment description jointly prepared by the programme and the workplace is often sufficient. However, especially during the graduation phase, where students address a concrete organisational issue or produce a final product, greater independence is expected from students, and both students and workplace supervisors seek additional clarity.

For workplace supervisors, it is not always clear what exactly is expected in assignments at associate degree level. Students receive theory and frameworks from the programme and therefore understand what is expected from the educational perspective. However, assignments do not always align with everyday professional practice, which creates uncertainty. In some cases, students only discover halfway through – or at the end of – a placement or work-based assignment that the assignment does not meet the requirements. This can result in study delay or dropout.

Students and representatives from the professional field indicate that students are sometimes given too much freedom and that there is a greater need for interim contact with the programme. Full-time students in particular expect programmes to take a more directive role. Representatives from the professional field appreciate it when the programme appoints a single contact person who serves as a point of contact.

Navigating between programme and placement or workplace

“I had a study coach who suited me very well, and I also had control over that relationship myself. But within my programme I also noticed very clearly that students sometimes found it very difficult when dealing with a workplace supervisor and a lecturer – because of scheduling issues, disagreements and that sort of thing. Especially in part-time programmes” (focus group, part-time student).

Students indicate that supervision within the triangle does not always function well and perceive a lack of time and capacity both from the programme and from the placement or workplace. Students are expected to take responsibility and organise communication themselves, but they often postpone doing so.

Once students are active within the workplace, the programme has less visibility of their development. In most cases, the programme supervisor visits the student to discuss progress, but the intensity and frequency of such visits vary considerably in practice and are sometimes limited to only one or two meetings. Contact with the programme is generally good at the outset, but may gradually diminish over time. From the programme side, there is often only limited capacity available for supervising students. Lecturers frequently have to take on supervision in addition to their other duties, and students indicate that their own reports become the primary basis for communication about the workplace experience.

Programme managers indicate that they must continue to monitor the quality of workplace supervision, even where clear agreements have been made at the outset. In many organisations, little time is available in practice for supervision, and “competition for attention” arises when too many students from one programme or university of applied sciences are present simultaneously. Students also experience that, in practice, they are sometimes primarily used as “extra pairs of hands” and are only able to focus to a limited extent on their learning tasks. In some cases, the experiences of students and programmes with particular organisations differ considerably.

Specific bottlenecks in part-time provision

“You start the programme in September and finish in July. So you have roughly twenty months, and within those twenty months you expect the student to take on a different role. No organisation is flexible enough to simply say: ‘Right, from tomorrow you can start working over there instead.’ That is not how things work in practice. Employers are willing, but they cannot organise this overnight, even if they do their best. And by January you are already pleased if it has worked out at all. There are real problems here” (focus group, chair of review panel).

Across all variants, tensions emerge in coordinating learning tasks. However, chairs of review panels, programme managers and students observe problems more frequently in programmes offered part-time than in other variants. In part-time programmes, there is sometimes little or no contact with the workplace, even though students are expected to make substantial progress within that workplace. They are not always adequately supported in doing so.

Although programme managers regard the workplace scan as a useful instrument for assessing in advance whether the workplace and workplace supervision are adequate, they nevertheless continue to observe problems in practice relating to supervision and the opportunities students have within organisations to work on assignments. In this respect, the focus groups also reveal a paradox: as students continue to develop, the workplace itself may no longer provide sufficient opportunities for learning.

Part-time students also indicate that they experience considerable time pressure. Programme managers acknowledge that a high degree of self-direction is often expected from part-time students, while students are not always capable of managing this successfully. Students frequently postpone deadlines, assignments and modules, while at the same time often having less contact with the programme than full-time students.

When programmes observe that workplace learning is not functioning effectively, they generally seek solutions together with the student, for example by initiating discussions, facilitating contacts within the professional field, or enabling students to carry out assignments within organisations connected to fellow students.

5.3 Good practices, bottlenecks and strategies in safeguarding work-based learning

The quality of work-based learning within programmes is safeguarded through agreements, tripartite agreements, workplace scans, placement plans and graduation assignments. Chairs of review panels indicate that, in safeguarding work-based learning, they examine the entire

process – from the initial design of workplace learning to arrangements in practice and the assessment of final projects.

“Yes, this already starts with standard 1, for example. Is there consultation with the advisory committee? Those two levels – the operational level and the managerial level within the programme. In my assessment, I look at the position of the professional field within that structure and how it is involved. And then, with the broader standard 2, we actually examine questions such as: ‘Are there clear agreements about what a student learns in the workplace and what they learn within the programme? How are these aligned? Are there sound placement plans? Are good agreements made with the professional field? How is the professional field involved? Are they not overburdened?’” (focus group, chair of review panel).

Chairs of review panels are generally positive about the way work-based learning is safeguarded. They indicate that they often gain a good understanding of how workplace learning is embedded within the programme and are also able to form a picture of how it functions in practice. At the same time, they acknowledge that their insight into the learning environment remains incomplete.

Safeguarding the quality of graduation projects

Panels specifically examine graduation projects in order to safeguard the graduation level. The associate degree level itself remains an important point of attention, and panels sometimes recommend making assignments more practice-oriented and more clearly differentiated from bachelor-level assignments. Graduation assignments are practice-oriented, focused on concrete professional issues, and often take the form of a design or advisory project. An example from the engineering domain would be improving the functioning of a particular machine. This practice-oriented character of graduation projects is appreciated by students, representatives from the professional field and programme managers. At the same time, workplace supervisors indicate that it is not always clear what exactly is expected from associate degree students during the graduation process.

The focus groups reveal hardly any problems relating to the assessment of graduation projects. Chairs of review panels do note, however, that particularly in full-time variants it can sometimes be difficult to determine whether the graduation project genuinely constitutes a demonstration of competence and accurately reflects the student’s knowledge and skills.

Responsibility for assessing graduation projects generally rests with the programme, while the workplace fulfils an advisory role. In most cases, the programme bases its assessment on a final interview or presentation, the final product, the student’s reflective report and the evaluation form completed by the workplace supervisor. Only occasionally is a workplace supervisor formally appointed as an examiner and involved as a co-assessor.

Bottlenecks in safeguarding assignments

Review panels have only limited insight into how work-based learning is safeguarded in daily practice. Chairs of review panels indicate that they primarily examine safeguarding at programme level. During accreditation visits, they speak with placement supervisors from the programme and with students, but not with workplace supervisors from companies. Accreditation review reports occasionally recommend intensifying contact within the workplace and paying greater attention to the supervision of students.

The focus groups with students, representatives from the professional field and programme managers present a more critical picture. Challenges in safeguarding work-based learning relate to the previously mentioned bottlenecks surrounding the search for suitable workplaces, the delineation of learning tasks and coordination within the triangle, but also concern the ways in which learning outcomes are demonstrated.

Responsibility for demonstrating learning outcomes often rests with the student, who generally maintains a portfolio for this purpose. While this offers flexibility, involvement within the triangle is sometimes lacking here as well. Students indicate that, particularly in relation to short-term assignments, they could theoretically include almost any company in their reflective report. Programmes provide students with flexibility in demonstrating learning outcomes and sometimes work with programmatic assessment, but they also acknowledge that students' development within the workplace is not always fully visible.

Evaluation of the quality of work-based learning

Programme managers indicate that they carry out interim reviews and evaluations at programme level, often involving the placement office. A challenge for many programmes is how to organise and monitor work-based learning across different delivery modes and to what extent all workplace partners are involved in the evaluation process. Such interim reviews are widely regarded as good practice.

6 Conclusion, reflections and next steps

Work-based learning plays an important role in higher education, but there is not always a clear understanding of how it functions in practice. In this thematic analysis of quality assurance, NVAO Netherlands examined how work-based learning has been organised and safeguarded within associate degree programmes since 2018, drawing on a content analysis of accreditation review reports and focus group discussions with programme managers, students, representatives from the professional field and chairs of review panels.

6.1 Conclusion

The accreditation review reports and focus groups present a mixed picture. Programmes organise work-based learning in collaboration with active professional advisory committees and practice partners. Placements and workplaces provide students with authentic learning environments and realistic assignments that stimulate their professional preparation and development. At the same time, students, representatives from the professional field and programme managers also experience bottlenecks in practice, relating to issues such as finding a suitable placement or workplace, supervision, and the concretisation of learning assignments.

Joint design, individual bottlenecks in practice

With regard to the sub-question of how work-based learning is organised within the triangle and how stakeholders and review panels view this, the findings show that the organisation of work-based learning at programme level generally functions well. The intended learning outcomes are aligned with a wide range of stakeholders from the professional field, with the professional advisory committee playing an important role. At the same time, programme managers and representatives from the professional field experience specific bottlenecks, such as limited familiarity with level 5 professional roles in sectors such as healthcare, welfare and education. Programme managers and chairs of review panels emphasise the value of jointly working towards clear professional profiles and national occupational profiles.

Stakeholders within the triangle of programme, workplace and student are often satisfied with the work-based learning within programmes. Learning in the workplace accelerates students' personal and professional development, and particularly within full-time and dual-track variants the relationships between the programme and the workplace or placement setting generally function well. Nevertheless, organising a suitable placement or workplace often remains an individual process for the student, involving bottlenecks related to finding an appropriate placement or workplace, delineating learning tasks, and coordinating within the triangle.

Where collaboration does not function effectively, this is mainly reflected in uncertainties surrounding the delineation of learning tasks. Programme managers perceive a tension between achieving the intended learning outcomes and allowing students individual freedom. At the same time, students and workplace supervisors are often uncertain whether the assignments they coordinate actually meet the requirements. Students may experience insufficient support and supervision both from the programme and from the workplace. Students also observe that fellow students can become "overwhelmed" and that interaction within the triangle does not always function effectively.

Strategies adopted by programmes are often aimed at strengthening mutual coordination and ensuring, prior to placements or workplace learning, that agreements are clear and properly safeguarded.

The student bears primary responsibility

The findings relating to the sub-question of how work-based learning is safeguarded also present a mixed picture. The quality of graduation projects is generally well safeguarded, since responsibility for assessment usually rests with the programme, while the workplace supervisor

fulfils an advisory role. Nevertheless, programme managers and workplace supervisors indicate that there is not always a clear view of the student's individual development throughout the programme.

Responsibility for demonstrating the achievement of learning outcomes rests with the student, who generally maintains a portfolio for this purpose. While this offers flexibility, supervisors from both the programme and the workplace do not always actively monitor the student's development. Programme managers indicate that they recognise these problems and intervene when they observe difficulties arising, but they also note that students do not always take responsibility themselves or communicate when problems occur.

Programme managers report investing heavily "at the outset", for example by establishing tripartite agreements, increasing the expertise of workplace supervisors, conducting workplace scans and reviewing placement plans. During the focus groups, workplace supervisors and students argued for more intensive contact within the triangle and identified it as a good practice when the programme provides a clear contact person for supervision. Above all, there is a need for clarity and feedback throughout the work-based learning process. The focus groups did not make clear whether responsibilities are always adequately coordinated and understood.

Chairs of review panels indicate that, in safeguarding work-based learning, they examine the entire process, from the initial organisation of work-based learning to practical arrangements and the assessment of graduation projects. However, attention is directed primarily towards safeguarding at programme level. There is less insight into how safeguarding functions in day-to-day practice.

Issues particularly in part-time variants, and to a lesser extent in full-time variants

Across all variants, learning in professional practice plays an important role, and effective coordination and supervision from both the programme and the professional field are essential. In practice, however, differences exist in the authenticity of learning situations, the intensity of collaboration between the programme and the professional field, and the level of responsibility expected from students.

In programmes offered full-time, students usually undertake placements. Learning situations are often less authentic, but programmes invest substantially in bringing professional practice into the educational setting. During their studies, students gradually work towards greater independence. In dual-track variants, collaboration is more structurally embedded and agreements are formally documented, which benefits quality assurance. Dual-track programmes generally make explicit agreements with employers about their role in educating students, including what students are expected to learn and how they will be supervised.

This thematic analysis of quality assurance reveals substantial differences between domains and programmes, but bottlenecks are more prominent in programmes offered part-time.

In part-time variants, a large share of responsibility rests with the student, resulting in reduced oversight by the programme of the learning process. Students are not always supported by the workplace in their development, while the programme's involvement in work-based learning is often limited. Private providers in particular are only minimally involved in education within professional practice. Programme managers and chairs of review panels also indicate that part-time provision contains an inherent tension, because part-time students frequently use the programme to develop themselves beyond their current employer or position.

6.2 Reflections and next steps

This qualitative analysis of accreditation review reports and focus groups has its limitations, but it nevertheless provides insight into where specific attention is needed in relation to work-based learning. The analysis confirms the findings of studies conducted by the Inspectorate of Education (2025a, 2026) and the Education Council (2024), which identify sound programme

design and clear agreements regarding work-based learning as crucial preconditions for effective work-based learning, while seeing particular challenges in gaining sufficient oversight of practice.

This thematic analysis of quality assurance results in a number of interrelated recommendations aimed at strengthening communication between the programme and the professional field within the triangle, while also addressing external quality assurance. The recommendations concerning quality assurance extend beyond associate degree programmes and are relevant to all higher education programmes in which work-based learning plays an important role.

Create clarity in advance regarding expectations and the associate degree level

High-quality work-based learning requires strong integration of work-based learning within the curriculum and clear agreements between the programme and the relevant professional field. Familiarity within the professional field with level 5 roles is essential in this respect. Clear and concrete professional profiles, elaborated in a sector-specific manner and reflected in specific job classification structures, lead to suitable assignments within the workplace. This also requires that workplaces have realistic expectations regarding students' capabilities within the programme they are following, as well as a stronger positioning of associate degree students within agreements concerning work-based learning.

These aspects are already receiving attention from programmes and specific professional sectors. It is expected that the positioning and profile of associate degree programmes will continue to develop further in the coming years.

Strengthen the triangle in practice and focus on concretising learning tasks

Particularly in part-time and full-time variants, more structural attention is needed for the supervision of individual students in practice, both from the programme and from the workplace or placement setting. The phase in which the learning task is concretised is especially crucial, since this gives focus to the assignment the student is expected to carry out. This requires interim coordination within the triangle, after agreements have been made but well before the final assessment, so that adjustments remain possible. Focus group discussants identified fixed contact persons from the programme, knowledgeable workplace supervisors, and interim checks on whether the concretisation of learning tasks is progressing effectively as measures that programmes and workplace providers can implement.

Provide clear frameworks and make firm agreements in part-time variants

Part-time variants require particularly clear frameworks and explicit agreements regarding work-based learning. Since a substantial degree of responsibility rests with the student, there is a risk that students receive insufficient guidance and support from both the programme and the workplace. Clear agreements between the programme, the student and the workplace regarding learning tasks, supervision and available development opportunities are therefore essential.

Programmes should monitor more actively whether part-time students are actually able to achieve their learning outcomes within their workplace and whether sufficient opportunities exist for professional development. This also requires realistic expectations from employers regarding the time, space and support students need in order to combine work and study successfully. More active guidance from the programme can help prevent study delay, uncertainty and dropout among part-time students.

Safeguard the quality of work-based learning structurally

Higher education institutions remain ultimately responsible for safeguarding the quality of the learning environment. They can hold organisations and students accountable for agreements that have been made and, particularly in part-time and full-time variants, must ensure that students are still able to achieve the intended learning outcomes when a placement or workplace proves inadequate.

Programmes often keep a close watch on developments, but the safeguarding of work-based learning in practice is not yet sufficiently embedded in a structural way. NVAO Netherlands expects higher education programmes actively to monitor students' individual development within placements and workplaces, oversee the quality of placements and workplaces, and provide alternatives where placements or workplaces do not meet the required standards.

In consultation with stakeholders, NVAO Netherlands will further adapt the *Guide to Work-Based Learning* (2022) to make it more practice-oriented. In addition, programme assessments will devote greater attention to the different programme variants and the implementation of work-based learning. Review panels will be asked to engage more actively with programmes, students and representatives from the professional field regarding the issues identified above. For programmes specifically, particular attention will be given to the safeguarding of work-based learning. The focus on work-based learning and the associated points for attention during accreditation reviews should be clearly reflected in the panels' advisory reports. NVAO Netherlands will elaborate this further in the procedures for programme assessments. Consideration will also be given to whether, and in what way, workplace supervisors can be involved more actively in programme assessments.

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8 Appendix: research design

The design of this thematic analysis of quality assurance concerning work-based learning within associate degree programmes is interpretative in nature. In order to answer the question of how work-based learning within associate degree programmes is organised and safeguarded, a content analysis of 44 accreditation review reports was combined with eight focus groups involving programme managers, students, representatives from the professional field and chairs of review panels. No absolute criteria were used to measure the quality of work-based learning; instead, the study explored the extent to which stakeholders are able to organise and safeguard work-based learning, as well as the bottlenecks and strategies they identify in doing so.

Qualitative content analysis of accreditation review reports

A qualitative content analysis of 44 accreditation review reports, selected from a total of 336 assessments of new and existing programmes with decision dates between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2024, provides insight into how work-based learning is organised and safeguarded in practice. In the selection process, distinctions were made between the most common combinations of variants: part-time, part-time/full-time, full-time, and part-time/dual-track. Programmes were also selected proportionally from both publicly funded and privately funded categories. The programmes originate from different domains. The selection included reports from the period in which associate degree programmes acquired an independent position (2018–2020), as well as more recent reports.

Following the interpretative grounded theory approach, the reports were first coded openly and subsequently coded in a more focused manner using the software package Atlas.ti. In this process, the sub-questions guided the coding procedure, while the different phases of work-based learning were followed during coding (Charmaz, 2014). The open coding phase revealed several themes, including differences between programme variants. These differences were subsequently incorporated as points of attention in both the topic list and the analysis of the focus groups.

Analysis of focus groups

To gain greater insight into experiences and strategies relating to the organisation and safeguarding of work-based learning, focus groups were conducted. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and a call for participation on LinkedIn. In total, eight homogeneous focus groups were organised, each consisting of four to seven participants: two groups with experienced chairs of review panels, three with programme managers from different programme variants, two with representatives from the professional field, and one group with associate degree students from different variants. Participants were involved in programmes across a variety of domains. Each focus group was conducted by a researcher together with a policy officer from NVAO Netherlands. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Participants' privacy was safeguarded through an informed consent procedure and pseudonymisation during data processing.

The focus groups provided room for participants to share experiences and perspectives. In all groups, a topic list was used covering the following themes:

- The concept of work-based learning; recognition and suitability of the definition and delineation;
- Experiences with work-based learning and the way in which it is organised;
- Differences and similarities between programme variants;
- Assessment, safeguarding and quality assurance;
- Good practices, bottlenecks, points for improvement and strategies;
- Recommendations for stakeholders within the triangle and for quality assurance.

The extent to which topics were explored in depth differed between groups. In groups with chairs of review panels and programme managers, for example, discussions focused more

extensively on differences and similarities between variants. With students and representatives from the professional field, more attention was devoted to the concretisation of learning assignments and the achievement of learning outcomes.

The focus groups were analysed qualitatively in a manner comparable to the analysis of the accreditation review reports, and findings from both sources were continuously compared with one another.

