Master Thesis

Does the teaching assistant course provide vocational skills for trainees and workers at a particular vocational school in the Netherlands?

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Abstract

This study aimed to research to what extent the teaching assistant training, at a vocational education school in the Netherlands, does meet the job sector requirements for trainees and workers in terms of content and form. According to the literature, vocational education's main goal is to give students a good starting point in the workplace. Understanding the conditions under which VET students learn best in real workplaces is critical in providing suitable workplace learning environments and effective workplace learning for VET students (Nisula & Metso, 2019). To develop innovative learning opportunities for a successful school-to-work transfer, personalised learning might be an option. Personalised learning is about adapting education to individual needs, interests, and attitudes to guarantee that every student, regardless of origin or circumstances, achieves the best attainable levels (Aukema, 2021). This research is broken down into three sub-questions to address the main question. Using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, data were obtained from supervisors of second and third-year students of the teaching assistant program of a vocational education school in the Netherlands. The findings revealed that the content of the teaching assistant training is adequate according to the supervisors however, the level of the students' theoretical expertise in the field is not readily apparent. Supervisors are attracted to the idea of personalised learning, yet they are sceptical that it is truly feasible in practice. It is advised to maintain the current educational model and add more practical-focused assignments to the curriculum.

Keywords: Vocational education and training, VET, learning in the workplace, workplace learning, questionnaire, the Netherlands, personalised learning

Abstract in Dutch

Het doel van dit onderzoek was om te onderzoeken in hoeverre de opleiding tot onderwijsassistent, aan een mbo-school in Nederland, qua inhoud en vorm voldoet aan de eisen van de beroepssector van stagiairs en werkenden. Volgens de literatuur is het belangrijkste doel van het beroepsonderwijs om studenten een goede start op de werkvloer te geven. Inzicht in de omstandigheden waaronder mbo-studenten het beste leren op werkplekken is van cruciaal belang voor het bieden van geschikte werkplekleeromgevingen en effectief werkplekleren (Nisula & Metso, 2019). Om innovatieve leermogelijkheden te ontwikkelen voor een succesvolle overdracht van school naar werk, kan gepersonaliseerd leren een optie zijn. Gepersonaliseerd leren gaat over het aanpassen van het onderwijs aan individuele behoeften, interesses en attitudes om te garanderen dat elke leerling, ongeacht afkomst of omstandigheden,

het best haalbare niveau haalt (Aukema, 2021). Dit onderzoek is onderverdeeld in drie deelvragen om de hoofdvraag te beantwoorden. Met behulp van een vragenlijst en een semigestructureerd interview zijn gegevens verkregen van stagebegeleiders van tweede- en derdejaars studenten van de onderwijsassistent-opleiding van een mbo-school in Nederland. Uit de bevindingen bleek dat de inhoud van de opleiding tot onderwijsassistent volgens de begeleiders adequaat is, maar het niveau van de theoretische expertise van de studenten in het vakgebied is niet direct zichtbaar. Stagebegeleiders voelen zich aangetrokken tot het idee van gepersonaliseerd leren, maar ze zijn sceptisch dat het in de praktijk echt haalbaar is. Geadviseerd wordt om de huidige vorm van het onderwijs te behouden en meer gerichte praktijkopdrachten aan het onderwijs toe te voegen.

Trefwoorden: Beroepsonderwijs en -opleiding, MBO-onderwijs, leren op de werkplek, werkplekleren, vragenlijst, Nederland, gepersonaliseerd leren

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1 | Introduction and theoretical exploration

Rapid changes in the workplace and society, and changes in work organisations have led both employers and employees to understand the importance of learning throughout one's career. Over the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in interest in research focusing on learning at work, through work, and for work (Tynjala, 2013). Workplaces are playing a larger and more responsible role in the education of vocational students. This is because formal educational institutions cannot keep up with the demands of today's rapidly changing workplace (Nisula & Metso, 2019).

1.1 Vocational education

The majority of professions require specialised knowledge and abilities. As a result, vocational qualifications for vocational education have been developed (Lucas et al., 2012). Several countries have multiple systems of vocational education and training (e.g., Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland) (Böhn & Deutscher, 2020). A definition of vocational education is the supply of resources, activities, and teaching that are aimed to educate people to function at a specific level in particular jobs in the context of (typically) paid employment or internships. The development of practical competence within, or for, a particular work domain is the focus of vocational education (Lucas et al., 2012). Vocational education and training (VET) are at the centre of the school-to-work transition, alternating practical training in a hosting firm with theoretical study in a vocational school (Masdonati et al., 2010). Ideally, students will be able to actively connect the knowledge learned in the school setting to new scenarios that occur in various contexts, such as the workplace (Jackson et al., 2019).

The idea of providing apprentices with both practical and theoretical knowledge by combining workplace-based training programmes, is typically provided by the public sector with a school-based component. This is what distinguishes this type of vocational education and training. This type of VET leads to qualifications in nationally recognised occupations (Böhn & Deutscher, 2020). Therefore, VET is frequently assumed to provide easy access to the labour market (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

In most situations, VET programmes provide for a smooth transfer from school to work, as apprentices have three years to gradually integrate into the workforce (Masdonati et al., 2010). A few advantages of VET are listed below. On the one hand, work-based training in a hosting firm allows apprentices to refine and enhance their practical abilities, which is

beneficial, particularly for those who struggled in school during compulsory education. On the other hand, according to a study, there is even a beneficial impact on youth unemployment rates, as well as economic growth, stability, and competitiveness (Böhn & Deutscher, 2020).

However, unlike in the past, combined school and work-based VET programmes do not always provide a steady and gradual school-to-work transfer (Masdonati et al., 2010; Akkerman et al., 2012). For example, despite their stated importance for economic and educational policy, VET students worldwide face difficulties with quality assurance and improvement (Böhn & Deutscher, 2020); therefore, vocational education can have negative effects on the labour market later on. This is frequently due to outdated or limited acquired skills. Generic skills can help people adjust to technological, organisational, and structural changes in the labour market (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

Moreover, worldwide VET delivery is challenged by several problems, including increasing skill shortages in particular industries and quickly changing skill requirements. A skills shortage is attributed to the use of outdated curricula, insufficient training resources, and outdated skills (Arinaitwe, 2021). In Switzerland, they face similar difficulties in VET. Around half of all young people in Switzerland go through longer, more complicated, and chaotic transitions, marked by school dropout, reorientation, or periods of inactivity and unemployment. Some young people are therefore disadvantaged. Examples of this are people of foreign origin, those with academic difficulties, and those with a low socioeconomic status. These people are more likely to experience non-linear school-to-work transitions, which can jeopardise their professional and social integration (Masdonati et al., 2010).

In general, vocational education and training appear to have elicited mixed reactions. It is frequently considered a "safety net" and a route from school to employment for young people, but it is also regarded as a distraction from higher education and high-status professions (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

1.2 Learning at the workplace

VET is a broad term that encompasses school- and work-based learning, as well as integrating activities that are frequently regarded as critical to the development of vocational competence (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). In vocational education, workplaces have a prominent place and responsibility (Nisula & Metso, 2019). In recent VET developments, the necessity for collaboration between institutions and the workplace to match the supply of skills to the demands of industries has been a recurring issue. Even though several studies emphasise the

role of institutions and the workplace in skill development (Billet, 2004; Arinaitwe, 2021; Akkerman et al., 2012), there are obstacles to this cooperation. Formal educational institutions are often unable to keep up with the demands of today's fast-changing industry. Organisations (workplaces), VET, and VET students all face challenges as the importance of workplaces in student learning grows (Nisula & Metso, 2019).

Divers studies have revealed that the transition from VET schools to the workplace is neither seamless nor automatic (Renta Davids et al., 2016; Akkerman et al., 2012; Finch et al., 2007). Students must be able to combine a variety of teaching and learning experiences in the workplace to develop professional competencies and then transfer them to the workplace (Renta Davids et al., 2016). The presence of problems in day-to-day situations in the host company, which primarily relate to contextual and organisational characteristics, is a notable struggle that characterises the internship. This structure emphasises the presence of problematic training environments, resulting in strained workplace relationships, poor learning circumstances, and work-related issues (Masdonati et al., 2010). The lack of workplace mentors and boundary spanners, limited access to workplace activities, a lack of clear regulations to facilitate collaborations, the cultural divide between academia and industry, and insufficient resources are just a few of the cooperation problems (Arinaitwe, 2021). The quality of workplace learning, as well as the quality of the links between education and employment for both learning and practical collaboration between school and work, is sometimes regarded as a concern (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

It is critical to shed light on the factors that directly impact students' workplace learning success (Nisula & Metso, 2019; Virtanen et al., 2014). Learning a given profession entails learning the profession's skilful and expert behaviours. While professional learning benefits from intimate interaction between students (beginners) and experienced colleagues in a real-world setting, student learning in the workplace is intrinsically individual. Students are required to develop contextualised and personalised how-to information in the workplace, as well as use professional skills and expertise to complete their tasks (Nisula & Metso, 2019). The opportunities the workplace provides students in terms of the activities they engage in and the interactions with others, as well as how people choose to engage, are crucial to their ability to learn through participation in the workplace (Billet, 2004). The ability to engage in workplace activities and access to support and guidance are, therefore, key features of learning at the workplace (Sandal et al., 2014).

1.3 Personalised learning

Choosing a profession and getting an apprenticeship job is important, but they are not enough to ensure a smooth transition from school to work. Apprenticeships have been identified as valuable learning and working trajectories for making successful transitions and relations between school and work (Akkerman et al., 2012). Apprentices who begin their VET programme should receive assistance and support to help them adjust to their new learning framework and to support them if they want to, or need to interrupt their programme. This type of assistance should consider and involve persons who are part of the apprentices' VET framework, such as their trainers, coworkers, employers, and teachers (Masdonati et al., 2010).

For a successful school-to-work transfer, it is critical to develop innovative learning opportunities (Grant & Basye, 2014). Dynamic learning experiences that are collaborative, relevant, and engaging are beneficial to students. While preserving the highest possible standards, education should be adapted to the student's abilities, needs, and interests. The key to engaging students could be personalised learning with teachers paving the way for learning to be as relevant, rigorous, and meaningful inside the classroom as it is outside. Personalisation urges educators to be more open and flexible so that students can put more effort into creating their unique learning paths. Students who engage in personalised learning at their own pace have access to tools and feedback that encourage them to achieve their abilities and potential (Grant & Basye, 2014).

Each learner acquires knowledge and experience in their own way. To get the most out of each student, education ought to be tailored to their unique talents, intelligence, interests, requirements, learning styles, and possibilities. There is an increasing demand from politicians to offer tailor-made education and to focus on the student with his or her (learning) characteristics. This does not only concern students with disadvantages but also excellent students (Aukema, 2021). The VET sector has very diverse groupings; students do have a wide range of specific interests and needs, necessitating the individualization of training to meet each student's wants and expectations (Zoyke, 2014).

Personalised learning, according to Aukema (2021), is about adapting education to individual needs, interests, and attitudes to guarantee that every student, regardless of origin or circumstances, achieves and meets the best attainable levels, right across the accomplishment spectrum. This definition makes it clear that personalised education is a tool for getting the most out of students, but not a goal in itself. According to Courcier (2007), Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences served as the inspiration for personalised learning. Identifying the

appropriate learning style for each student and taking into account their interests, needs, and talents, for instance, are crucial components of defining personalised learning.

In personalised education, the student, with their unique abilities and requirements, is at the centre of the teaching, learning, and assessment process. Exploring with students the reason for learning is an important initial step in the personalised learning process. Students' desire, dedication, and persistence begin to increase once they understand the purpose and value of what they are about to learn (Rickabaugh, 2015). One of the most important aspects of efficient tailored personalised learning is encouraging students' natural curiosity through active engagement with their surroundings. The activities in this learning paradigm are meant to be meaningful and relevant, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated, as well as to stimulate individual growth. By altering, linking, and enabling them in this way, personalised learning supports learners, educators, and students in making crucial adjustments. In this learning process, focusing on student strengths is critical to engagement and empowerment (Hughey, 2020). For example, in a tailored educational environment, personalised information on timetables, grades, and attendance is available. In a personalised learning environment, students have access to both teachers and classmates, as well as digital learning materials such as books and exercises, connections to instructional films, simulations, online games, and open learning materials that are tailored to their individual needs (Hughey, 2020).

Personalised learning can be detached from time, location, and space. This provides students with more flexible learning opportunities, which can be beneficial to students who have been sick for a long time or who have functional limitations (De Kool, 2014). Making vocational education more flexible would fundamentally alter students' learning processes because they will have more influence over their learning: school is no longer the only place where students can learn; they can also learn at home (via a digital learning environment) and work (workplace learning). Much more frequently, the student will (partially) shape their learning activity and will also select the sequence of learning. As a result, the fixed learning group is losing influence. Thinking and organising in cohorts are no longer needed because people can change their speed (accelerate, slow down) and join at any time (Aukema 2021).

For many students, the procedure outlined above is unfamiliar and perplexing. They are familiar with education as an extrinsically motivated, compliance-driven, adult-directed experience. It takes time and assistance to move to a learning environment where students have genuine say in their learning path and are encouraged and expected to commit to and share leadership for their learning (Rickabaugh, 2015).

At the same time, the teacher's position as a study coach will become increasingly important. More and more coaching teachers are needed to assist students in making decisions about their learning paths. This requires people-oriented specialists who can step away from the subject matter for a while and make significant personal contact with the learner (Aukema, 2021). Teachers have said that personalised learning has reinvigorated their practice and restored a sense of respect in their work, according to Rickabaugh (2015). While their efforts are no less intense, they can observe the direct and immediate impact of their work. Furthermore, Rickabaugh (2015) discovered that teachers cannot picture teaching in a regular classroom setting again, and that less experienced teachers express joy and efficacy that the work they are doing with students is making a significant difference in their learning. Courcier (2007) also investigated the attitude of teachers towards personalised learning. Even though the theory behind personalised learning is a good one, the teachers who were interviewed in the study of Courcier (2007) believe that it is very difficult to apply in actual classroom settings.

1.4 Challenges in a vocational school in the Netherlands

A vocational education school (MBO-school in Dutch) has likewise taken on the difficulties stated above in the literature. The vocational school in this research is a Christian VET school in the northeast of the Netherlands. The VET school prepares students to be good professionals, socially engaged citizens, and most importantly, people who are aware of who they are and what they are capable of. The VET school offers vocational training in a broad range of professions (e.g., technical, health care, hospitality, mobility, tourism and administration). Internships take up a substantial part of all training programmes. During these internships, students experience similar challenges in the workplace as has been described in the literature. In particular, the challenge of narrowing the gap between the workplace and education has arisen in the programme for teaching assistant

1.5 Content of the teaching assistant program

The teaching assistant program at this particular vocational education school in the northeast of the Netherlands is offered in a three-year vocational training pathway and consists of three parts. Students have lessons and other educational activities at school during the program. Students will take the generic courses Language proficiency, Mathematics, and English throughout their education. The subjects pedagogy, didactics, development and activities, media literacy, communication, ideological development, professional ethics, expression and care are offered in the form of lessons and projects. Additionally, throughout each school

year, students do an internship. Internships are one day a week in year one, two days in year two, and three days a week in year three. Each internship day should provide the students with approximately seven hours of practical experience (Alfa-College, 2021). The student will be assigned a supervisor during the internship. According to Dymock (1999), a supervisor is "concerned with the longer-term acquisition and application of skills in a developing career through a form of advising and counselling." Instruction and guidance are critical components of VET workplace learning, mainly to facilitate students' acquisition of vocational skills through participation in work tasks (Sandal et al., 2014). Therefore, the supervisor provides substantive information about their job to the student and demonstrates how the work is done in practice (Dymock, 1999). Furthermore, the supervisor assists the student with his practical assignments. As a result, the supervisor has a good understanding of the student's knowledge and skills.

To find out whether personalised learning is a good choice for the teaching assistant training of a vocational school in the Netherlands, research is conducted in the professional field. Is there a practical need for students to receive flexible education? What are professionals' thoughts on personalised learning in the teaching assistant programme? Is it desired to provide education that is tailored to the specific demands of the workplace?

1.6 Research question

The following research question follows:

''To what extent does the teaching assistant course at a vocational education school in the Netherlands meets the job sector requirements for trainees and workers in terms of content and form.''

The following sub-questions can help to provide an answer to the research questions:

- *To what extent do professional instructors at internship schools experience that students are theoretically prepared and have learned sufficient skills at the vocational school for the practical environment?*
- *To what level do internship schools have a preference over the number of days a student spends at the workplace?*
- *To what extent can personalised learning be expected to improve the transfer from school to work?*

2 | Method

2.1 Research population and sampling method

The target population of this study consisted of primary school teachers who, at the time of this research study, supervised a second or third-year teaching assistant student from a specific vocational education school in the year 2021-2022. They were approached by the coaches of the students at the vocational school. In this study, the supervisors of first-year students are excluded, because these students and their supervisors meet only once a week, and the students are not yet sufficiently familiar with the workplace. Supervisors of second and third-year students have a greater understanding of the study programme because their student is already further along in the programme, and the student demonstrates whether or not the knowledge gained during the programme has been retained.

2.2 Research design

To acquire insight into the study's topic, a mixed design (also known as 'methodical triangulation') is used. Triangulation provides a more complete understanding of the research problem, as well as a more detailed and balanced perspective, compared to a single-method design. It also improves the consistency and quality of the data (Schaap et al., 2011). The data has been collected in two phases: a quantitative method using a questionnaire and a qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview to extract deeper meanings from the prior findings. This was chosen because qualitative research offers depth and detail and is focused on the interpretation or meaning of the data (Schindler, 2018).

For the quantitative portion of this study, a questionnaire has been developed for supervising teachers in primary schools. Respondents for this research are chosen from the vocational education school's database of internship schools. The contact information for the supervisors is available to the vocational school professionals who coach the students.

The questionnaire consists of different types of questions. Topics in the questionnaire are attitude towards the quality of the students, preference for how often students will be present at the internship, and the level of interest in personalised learning at the workplace. The questionnaire's findings will reveal how the professional field regards a vocational education schools' teaching assistant training and whether education should be conducted differently (see Appendix 1).

The deeper meanings of the research findings are examined through a semi-structured interview in the research's final phase (see Appendix 2). Respondents had the option of leaving

their contact information in the survey. Only three of the total number of respondents who completed the questionnaire provided their contact information. One of these respondents accepted the invitation for an interview. As we expected that the number of participants for the interviews would be low, the interview is mostly used to illustrate findings from the survey rather than to discover completely new findings. With this purpose in mind, the interview is summarised rather than transcribed.

The quantitative and qualitative data findings are combined, and a general conclusion is reached on what extent the teaching assistant course at a vocational education school meets the job sector requirements for trainees and workers in terms of content and form.

2.3 Instruments

A questionnaire is one of the most common data collection techniques, particularly in social science research (Taherdoost, 2016). Questionnaires are an objective way to gather data about large groups of people's knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and behaviours (Boynton et al., 2004). The questionnaire in this research was developed by the researcher and was administered online through Google Forms and divided into three sections. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items in total. The estimated time for answering the questionnaire was 15 minutes. The questionnaire contains self-developed questions instead of pre-existing ones. The questions are centred on the opinions and experiences of supervisors of teaching assistant students at a vocational education school.

In the first section, the respondent’s demographic information was asked. This section includes quantitative data such as gender, age, years of experience working in primary education, school location, completed education, years of supervising a teaching assistant student, and year of the course their current student is in. Following that, in the second section, questions about the content and quality of the teaching assistant training were asked. These questions are centred on the supervisors' opinions and experiences. A few of the questions are in the form of a Likert scale with a range of 1-5. A Likert scale is used to measure a person's or a group's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions concerning social events or symptoms. Respondents are asked to rate how strongly they agree (5), agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (1) (Baarda et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the second section, there are open-ended questions that require an explanation or an example. Those responses to these items are qualitative. It's difficult to research the quality of the items and the questionnaire with qualitative responses, therefore, items must be assigned quantifiable values, which is difficult to do on qualitative responses (Drenth et al., 2006). In the last section of the questionnaire, multiple-choice

questions were asked, followed by an open-ended question in which an explanation of the multiple-choice question is asked.

In the second phase of this study, a semi-structured interview was used (see Appendix 2). In a semi-structured interview, the questions and responses are not predetermined, but the themes are. An interview has the advantage of quickly presenting information on one or more topics while also allowing the researcher to ask questions. The flexibility of open interviews is well-known. For instance, topics can be rearranged according to the conversation's flow. (Baarda et al., 2021)

The degree to which a measurement measures what it claims to measure is expressed by its validity. Internal validity refers to how accurately the research measures quantified what it was designed to measure (Bolarinwa, 2015). Face validity was used in the questionnaire and interview, to define internal and concept validity. Face validity is established when an expert on the research subject reviews the questions and concludes that it measures the characteristic or trait of interest. Face validity entails the expert looking at the items in the questionnaire or questions for the interview and agreeing that the test is a valid measure of the concept being measured based solely on its appearance. This means they're determining whether each of the measuring items corresponds to any given conceptual domain of the concept (Bolarinwa, 2015). The expert in this research was the programme manager of the vocational school used in the study.

The degree to which a measurement produces stable and consistent results is referred to as its reliability. Repeatability is another aspect of reliability. A scale or test is reliable if it consistently produces the same result when repeated measurements are made (Bolarinwa, 2015). The reliability of the questionnaire's Likert scale questions was calculated using a Chronbach's alpha (Table 1). Cronbach Alpha provides a measure of the internal consistency of a test. Internal consistency describes the extent to which all of the items in a test measure the same concept or construct and is thus related to the test's interrelatedness (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). In this research an alpha of 0.61 was found. A score higher than 0.60 is acceptable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

Table 1

Reliability Statistics

α	N of Items
0,61	3

2.4 Analysis

The first step in data analysis is to sort and organise the data by coding it (Seers, 2011). The data analysis procedure in this study was carried out in accordance with Richards and Morse's (2012) recommendations. Encoding data, finding themes, editing codes and themes, and defining and interpreting findings are all part of the process. Following these procedures, the questionnaire data were first encoded. Data were analysed within framework analysis by marking each theme. For each item requiring a Likert scale response, a numeric value ranging from 1 for the first answer (e.g., strongly disagree) to 5 for the full answer (e.g., strongly agree), mean scores and standard deviations were calculated. Finally, the framework was summarized, and frequency and percent tables were generated for each item and comparisons were made which allowed for interpreting the full dataset by contrasting and comparing participants. The next step was to encode the interview. The same themes and codes were used as in the questionnaire. The findings were compared to the questionnaire, and a summary was formed. This research, particularly when focused on perceptions, was based on supervisors' statements in the questionnaire and interview, which always have a subjective component.

2.5 Procedure

First, the questionnaire was created in response to the research question and the literature. The supervisors of the vocational education school's students were invited to help recruit respondents. Personal information was not provided to the researcher for reasons of privacy. The questionnaire was sent by the coaches, who mentor the students at the vocational school. The coaches communicated with the student's supervisors. The coaches forwarded an email outlining the study and including a link to the questionnaire. The email contained all necessary information, including the research goals, questionnaire length, data storage, anonymity, voluntariness, and the authors' contact information. Participating teachers were not questioned about their personal information to retain their anonymity. If respondents were open to an interview, they could leave their contact information in a section of the questionnaire. Three

people were contacted by email and asked to participate in an interview. A reminder email with a request to complete the questionnaire was sent just before the deadline. A total of 113 persons have been contacted. The questionnaire was filled out by 26 persons.

2.6 Ethical aspects of the research

In this research, the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen were followed. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and anonymous.

3 | Results

The purpose of this study was to determine how well the teaching assistant training at a vocational education school in the Netherlands meets the job sector requirements for trainees and workers in terms of content and form. The research question was explored and divided into three sub-questions; To what extent do professional instructors at internship schools experience that students are theoretically prepared and have learned sufficient skills at school for the practical environment? To what level do internship schools have a preference over the number of days a student spends at the workplace? And to what extent can personalised learning be expected to improve the transfer from training to work?

For this study, data has been collected through a questionnaire (Appendix 2) and a semi-structured interview (Appendix 3). The questionnaire contained Likert scale questions and open-ended questions where an explanation of the answer is requested.

General background

The statistical analysis of the questionnaire on the supervisors of teaching assistants (Table 2) shows that 26 supervisors completed the questionnaire. Women make up 88.5 per cent of the respondents, while men make up 11.5%. Findings also revealed the median age group is 40-49 years old. Table 2 also shows the number of years of work- and supervising experience.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics Population

		Sample		
Category	**Sub-category**	***n***	**%**	**Median**
Gender	Male	3	11,5	Female
	Female	23	88,5	
Age	Between 20-29	5	19,2	Between 40-49
	Between 30-39	7	26,9	
	Between 40-49	4	15,4	
	Between 50-59	5	19,2	
	Between 60-69	5	19,2	
Work experience	0-5 years	3	11,5	≥ 15 years
	5-10 years	5	19,2	

	10-15 years	5	19,2	
	> 15 years	13	50,0	
Years of supervising	0-5 years	9	34,6	5-10 years
	5-10 years	12	46,2	
	10-15 years	0	0,0	
	More than 15 years	5	19,2	
Region	City	9	34,6	Village
	Village	17	65,4	

Quality of education

When asked if supervisors have sufficient knowledge about the content of the teaching assistant training, the answer is strongly divided. Findings revealed that 50% of respondents stated they have sufficient knowledge, while another 50% say they don't. Arguments for having sufficient knowledge include the intern sharing a lot of information with the supervisor. However, there have been more explanations for not having sufficient knowledge of the teaching assistant training. The student gives little or no explanation about the content of the training to the supervisor, there is minimal or difficult contact with the vocational school and its teachers, the student assignments are not clearly explained to the supervisors, and the supervisors need clarity on the requirements and criteria the student must meet. These arguments are supported in the interview. The supervisor specifically notices the relationship between the vocational education school and the internship school. Communication is difficult, and she lacks clarity and uniformity with the teachers. Teachers contradict each other. According to the supervisor, the assignments that the students must do are confusingly described and/or do not accurately reflect practice.

Respondents were asked to indicate the quality of education at the vocational education school. Findings indicate a 3.3 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (Table 3). Where 1 denotes very poor and 5 denotes really good. The majority of the thoughts on the students are positive. They are enthusiastic, eager to learn, and respectful. Several respondents stated that they enjoy working with the students. However, the explanations to this question mostly mention areas for improvement or areas where things aren't going so well. The most frequently provided response was that the assignments given to students are complex and undefined and do not always connect well with practice. There is also a great deal of indistinctness in the assignments the students need to do during the internship and there is a lack of communication between supervisors, students, and the vocational education school.

As for the interviewee, she is very pleased with the students she has supervised. She finds the students to be enthusiastic and eager to learn, and she observes that they enjoy their internships. The interviewee believes that the training content is well organised. She claims she has a good understanding of the content because she has been supervising students for many years. That being said, the interviewee also mentioned difficulties that are not going well at the vocational education school. As a critical point, the interviewee mentioned the assignments given to students. She thinks the assignments are too big and unsuitable for practice. Even so, communication with the vocational education school is difficult according to the interviewee.

Table 3

Likert Scale Questions of the Questionnaire

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
Impression about the quality of the training.	3,34	0,68
Is the student well prepared for the practical environment?	3,50	0,70

Theoretically prepared for the practical environment

First of all, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, the students were given a 3.6 for being well prepared for the practice (Table 3). Where 1 denotes inadequate practice preparation and 5 denotes great preparation. The supervisors consider the many internship hours a big plus in the preparation for the practical environment, as stated several times in the questionnaire.

The supervisors were then asked to provide examples of times when they believe the students are theoretically well prepared for practice. It is frequently stated in the questionnaire that they have difficulty seeing this demonstrated in the students. Hardly any specific examples can be cited to show that students are building up theoretical knowledge. According to one respondent, conversations with the student have revealed that practice and theory do not always go hand in hand. The student has already taken a theoretical exam but has yet to receive any lectures or assignments. Yet, one respondent claimed to see theoretical knowledge through the preparation of lessons and conceptual knowledge.

The supervisors were then asked in the questionnaire how they believe the student learned sufficient practical skills during the study programme. Many respondents cite the

training's extensive internship hours as a strength, internship experiences, in particular, provide learning opportunities. Another respondent mentioned that it also depends on the workplace whether the student demonstrates or has practical skills. The respondent believes that having complete trust in the student and allowing the student to do assignments are both necessary for the student to learn. Additionally, students' enthusiasm to learn and the student's understanding of what needs to be done during the internship are also examples of students' practical skills.

Finally, the supervisors were asked which theoretical or practical skills should receive more focus within the education programme. Several answers have been given to this question. Improving the students' language and math skills was mentioned by several respondents. Besides, how to cope with a more challenging pupil, how to arrange a theme, how to offer instructions and what a teaching assistant is expected to do.

According to the respondent who had been interviewed, the majority of students are well prepared for the practical situation. As an example of being practically prepared for practice, she mentions eagerness to learn. She believes that the student should spend many hours at the internships in order to gain more practical skills. The interviewee is unable to provide a specific example of how the students are theoretically prepared for practice. When asked what the training could add to their curriculum, the interviewee did not provide an explicit example.

Attitude towards personalised learning

The supervisors were asked how personalised learning can improve the quality of training and the transition from theory to practice. Many benefits are mentioned in the questionnaire. For example, with personalised learning, students can focus on their learning points while avoiding unnecessary assignments. Another benefit that has been mentioned is that each student can design his or her own path. When one student has a greater need to learn to organise and another has a greater need to learn didactics, everyone can learn to think about their own learning needs and find a way to meet them. In addition, another respondent stated that it is simpler for a student to accelerate their training.

In addition to benefits, development points for personalised learning are also identified. According to one respondent, intensive contact between the study programme, the workplace, and the student is critical for personalised learning. By actually speaking to the student on a regular basis to see what he needs, the student can develop to his full potential, the training is maximised, and the gap between theory and practice is narrowed. Furthermore, one respondent stated that the quality requirements must be derived from the vocational education school. What is expected of the students must be made clear to the supervisors and the students. One

respondent is doubtful whether personalised learning will be fitting for all students: students on the teaching assistant course are often young, and some students find it difficult to have a lot of freedom.

This subject was also discussed during the interview. Initially, the interviewee found it difficult to answer this question in a clear way. The idea of personalised learning was clear, but the supervisor didn't see it happening right away in her class. She particularly thought it could be challenging when students could do anything they wanted. These students need encouragement, structure, and assistance with planning from a teacher or supervisor according to the interviewee.

Preferences for internship days

The questionnaire results show that supervisors have a preference for the number of days the student is present at the workplace (Table 3). Supervisors prefer to see students at work for an average of 2.7 days. 62.5% of respondents prefer the student to be three days per week present at the workplace. Respondents stated that being physically present at the internship is critical for students. When students are present at the workplace more frequently, they form stronger relationships with the pupils and have more time to complete practical assignments. Another argument is that the student can immediately apply what he learned the day before the next. It can be determined that a one-day internship per week is insufficient. Respondents stated that the students have too little time to form a good relationship with the pupils and they do not get a good picture of what is happening in the workplace.

Furthermore, it is preferred by the supervisors that the internships take place in sequential order. Meaning that the students are at the workplace for several days in a row. It is convenient for the supervisors if the students arrive on the same days every time.

Respondents were asked whether students can start in the workplace throughout the year. The responses varied. Some supervisors consider it impractical when students can start at any time. They are afraid there may be no more capacity, and believe it is incompatible with their programme. Other respondents, on the other hand, do not believe it is a problem and feel that students can always join. Furthermore, it was suggested that an internship should not begin later than February, as they will be in the class for too little time to form a bond with the pupils. According to the supervisors, the internship should commence at the beginning of the academic year. If it is not possible and there is a need and no other choice, several supervisors will state that students are always welcome to join their schools. Finally, nearly 54% of the supervisors believe an internship should last between 6 and 12 months (Table 3).

The interviewee preferred that the student spends three days a week on the internship. And ideally from the start of the year as well. If the student begins the internship in September, the supervisor believes it will be beneficial. The formation of groups begins in September, and it is advisable if the student is a part of the group, in order for the pupils to recognise the student as a teaching assistant. She disagreed with the idea of year-round enrolment for students. This causes both the teacher and the pupils discomfort. The interviewee prefers structure, which is why she prefers it when the student is present on the same days and cannot be present variously. This allows pupils to know when the student is present, which brings peace and consistency to the classroom.

Table 3

Supervisors' Attitudes towards Presences at the Workplace

		Sample			
Category	**Sub-category**	***n***	***%***	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Preferences presences	Yes	24	92,3		
	No	2	7,7		
Preferences days a week	1 day	0	0,0	2,7	0,53
	2 days	8	33,3		
	3 days	15	62,5		
	4 days	1	4,2		
	5 days	0	0,0		
Preferences duration internship	1-10 weeks	0	0,0		
	2-3 months	0	0,0		
	3-6 months	4	15,4		
	6 months - 1 year	14	53,8		
	>1 year	8	30,8		

4 | Conclusion and discussion

4.1 General conclusion

This study aimed to research to what extent the teaching assistant course at a vocational education school in the Netherlands meets the job sector requirements for trainees and workers in terms of content and form.

First, a literature review on vocational education and training was done. According to the literature, vocational education's main goal is to give students a good starting point in the workplace (Nisula & Metso, 2019) by alternating practical training in a hosting firm with theoretical study in a vocational school (Masdonati et al., 2010). A contributing factor to the success of vocational education appears to be the work-oriented training in a hosting company. It enables students to develop and improve their practical abilities. Furthermore, there is a positive effect on youth unemployment rates as well as economic growth (Böhn & Deutscher, 2020). However, VET is occasionally proven to be a little more challenging (Masdonati et al., 2010). VET delivery is challenged by several problems, including increasing skill shortages in particular industries and quickly changing skill requirements (Arinaitwe, 2021). Understanding the conditions under which VET students learn best in real workplaces is critical in providing suitable workplace learning environments and effective workplace learning for VET students (Nisula & Metso, 2019). Successful factors that promote the quality of workplace learning are a suitable mentor who has time to exchange feedback (Hofmann et al., 2021), a good collaboration between the vocational education school and the workplace (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020) and access to workplace activities (Arinaitwe, 2021) with alternation between school and workplace activities (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). To narrow the gap between education and the workplace, personalised learning could be an option. Personalised learning claims to put more emphasis on the student's unique talents as well as their learning characteristics with a focus on adapting education to the individual needs, interests and attitudes. Making vocational education more flexible would fundamentally alter students' learning processes because they will have more influence over their learning (Aukema, 2021) When working with personalised learning, learning activities should be meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated (Hughey, 2020).

Second, the questionnaire was created and implemented. The questionnaire's findings reveal how the professional field regards the teaching assistant program and whether this program should be designed differently. In the first section of the questionnaire, there were questions

about the quality of the teaching assistant programme. Supervisors have stated that they have a fair amount of knowledge about the educational content of the training. They see the internships as a significant benefit of the course because practice leads to experience. Furthermore, the professionals were questioned on their preferences for the number of days the student is present at the workplace. Most supervisors agreed that three days a week, being physically present at the workplace is adequate and that one day at the workplace is insufficient.

Besides that, it was researched what the professional field thinks of the level of knowledge of the students. The level of the students' theoretical expertise in the field is not readily apparent. Arguments given for this were poor communication between the student and the supervisor or the students do not speak about what they learned at their vocational school. The supervisors have provided examples that demonstrate the student's readiness for the practical situation. They emphasise the importance of internships once more, stating that this is where the majority of knowledge is gained.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked about their professional opinion on personalised learning. In the questionnaire, the supervisors gave positive responses about personalised learning. Respondents are in favour of exploring the student's educational needs and utilising students' talents. However, the respondents acknowledge that the ideals will likely be difficult to achieve in the workplace soon.

Finally, an interview was held to further explain the questionnaire and have a better understanding of the supervisors' attitudes. A semi-structured interview was used to go over the questionnaire questions in greater detail. The interviewee claims she has a good understanding of the content of the teaching assistant programme. She finds the students well prepared for the workplace. She mentions internships as an example of how students have gained useful practical experience. Besides that, the interviewee is not completely satisfied with the assignments given to the students. Even so, cooperation between the school and workplace could be improved. The interviewee prefers the student to be present at the workplace three days a week for the entire school year. Personalised learning being implemented in vocational education, according to the interviewee, is not a bad idea. Although she has difficulty seeing it in practice. The student's learning styles are what makes it difficult for her. Students attending the teaching assistant training are still young and in need of guidance. If that direction shifts to more freedom and personal choice, the interviewee believes the students will struggle.

4.2 Sub-questions

This research has shown that, in general, supervisors of second and third-year teaching assistant students are satisfied with the training content. The average score given to the quality of education by questionnaire respondents is 3.34 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (Table 3). However, there are some things that the vocational education school could do better. Regarding the content of the training, multiple respondents, are dissatisfied with the assignments that students must complete. The assignments are too complex and do not fit in with practice. It has been described in the literature that to be able to actively connect the knowledge learned in school to new scenarios in the workplace, access to work-practice activities with innovative and meaningful learning opportunities (Grant & Basye, 2014; Hughey, 2020) and a good collaboration between vocational schools and the workplace is required (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). With this, the first sub-question; *to what extent do professional instructors at internship schools experience that students are theoretically prepared and have learned sufficient skills at the vocational school for the practical environment*, can be concluded that the level of theoretical knowledge is not clear to the supervisors. The level of practical skills is clearer and is gained during the internships.

Regarding the form of the programme, the supervisors are sufficiently satisfied with the current format of the training. The respondents indicated that they prefer it when the student is regularly present at work and that they would like to see them present for three days a week. Furthermore, they are not particularly interested in students starting throughout the year. As a result, the second sub-question; *to what level do internship schools have a preference over the number of days a student spends at the workplace*, can be answered.

In conclusion of the third sub-question: *to what extent can personalised learning be expected to improve the transfer from school to work*, it can be said that supervisors are attracted to the concept of personalised learning. However, the supervisors are sceptical that it is truly feasible in practice. Personalised learning can be detached from time, location, and space (De Kool, 2014). Students can decide how they will demonstrate or prove what they have learnt. They can design their own learning activities and choose the order in which they learn (Rickabaugh, 2015). This is something that the professionals in this study are debating. It is not useful in practice for students to be able to make their own decisions when they are at the workplace or when they are performing assignments in practice.

By answering the sub-questions, the main question can be answered. In conclusion to the main question. It can be said that the training for teaching assistants at a vocational education

school in the Netherlands aligns well with what is desired in practice. The training's content still has some room for improvement. The professional field is pleased with the training format. There is no need for professionals to provide students with personalised learning in the workplace.

With the findings of this study, the vocational school can conduct additional research to determine whether personalised learning is appropriate for the teaching assistant training and make changes to the curriculum to ensure that the training is more in line with practice.

The results, as discussed in this paper, stimulate three recommendations. 1. Give the students precise, practice-oriented assignments. 2. Have the student perform an internship on the same days every week, ideally three days a week. 3. Ensure strong cooperation between the training and the workplace.

This current research is an exploration into the current education of a vocational school in the Netherlands and whether it fits in well with what is expected of students in practice. For this study, a questionnaire was used to investigate the attitude of supervisors of second and third-year students of the teaching assistant programme. The questionnaire was then distributed to 113 people in a sample representative of the current population. Due to the low response rate, the external validity is low. The Cronbach alpha with a score of 0.61is acceptable. Yet by adding more Likert scale questions the internal consistency would be higher. Preferably with a score of 0.80 or higher.

Furthermore, the workplace of teaching assistants was specifically examined. As a result, the findings do not apply to all vocational education programmes or other vocational education schools offering the same programme. It is puzzling how few professionals responded to the interview invitation. It is wise to interpret these findings with caution and to seek additional information from additional research. The recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study in other vocational education programmes.

5 | Literature

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6 | Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Please note: the black bars indicate information that is confidential.

Opleiding tot onderwijsassistent

Beste leerkracht,

In het kader van het onderzoek naar het verbeteren van de opleiding onderwijsassistent voor het [redacted] is deze enquête opgesteld. Graag hoop ik dat u zoveel mogelijk informatie wil delen.

Alvast bedankt.

* Required

1. Wat is uw geslacht *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Man
- ◯ Vrouw
- ◯ Zeg ik liever niet

2. Wat is uw leeftijd? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 20-29
- ◯ 30-39
- ◯ 40-49
- ◯ 50-59
- ◯ 60-69

3. Hoeveel jaar bent u werkzaam in het basisonderwijs *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-5 jaar
- ◯ 5-10 jaar
- ◯ 10-15 jaar
- ◯ 15+ jaar

4. Staat de school waar u werkt in een dorp of stad? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Dorp
- ◯ Stad

5. Welke opleiding(en) heeft u afgerond? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Onderwijsassistent
- ◯ Pedagogisch medewerker
- ◯ Gespecialiseerd pedagogisch medewerker
- ◯ PABO
- ◯ Academische PABO
- ◯ Other: _____

6. Hoeveel jaren begeleidt u leerlingen van de opleiding onderwijsassistent in het basisonderwijs? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5 jaar
- 5-10 jaar
- 10-15 jaar
- 15+ jaar

7. Uit welk leerjaar begeleidt u momenteel een leerling van de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted]

Mark only one oval.

- Leerjaar 2
- Leerjaar 3

De opleiding

De volgende vragen gaan over de inhoud van de opleiding onderwijsassistent en over de kwaliteit van studenten van de opleiding onderwijsassistent.

8. Kunt u aangegeven of u voldoende inzicht heeft in de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted]

Mark only one oval.

- Ja
- Nee

9. Licht uw antwoord op de vorige vraag toe. *

10. Wat is uw indruk over de kwaliteit van de opleiding onderwijsassistent bi[redacted]? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Slechte kwaliteit	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Goede kwaliteit

11. Licht uw antwoord op de vorige vraag toe. *

12. In hoeverre ziet u dat de student door de opleiding onderwijsassistent van het [redacted] goed is voorbereid op de praktijk? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Helemaal niet goed	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Heel goed

13. Licht uw antwoord op de vorige vraag toe. (Kunt u dat met een voorbeeld toelichten) *

14. Waarin ziet u dat de student de theoretische kennis geleerd in de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted] toepast in de praktijk? *

15. Waarin ziet u dat de student voldoende praktische vaardigheden heeft geleerd op de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted] om toe te passen in de praktijk? *

16. Welke (theoretische) onderwerpen of vaardigheden vindt u meer aandacht verdienen binnen de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted]? *

Vorm van de opleiding onderwijsassistent

Hieronder worden vragen gesteld over het aantal dagen dat de student aanwezig is op de stageschool, hoe de opleiding onderwijsassistent is ingericht en gepersonaliseerd leren.

17. Momenteel is de opleiding onderwijsassistent van [redacted] gestructureerd: alle studenten doorlopen dezelfde route in 3 jaar. Stel, de opleiding gaat werken met gepersonaliseerd leren: het onderwijs wordt afgestemd op de mogelijkheden en de leerstijl van de individuele student. Op wat voor manier kan gepersonaliseerd leren de kwaliteit en overgang van de opleiding onderwijsassistent naar praktijk verbeteren? *

18. Heeft u een voorkeur voor het aantal dagen dat de leerling onderwijsassistent op de stageschool aanwezig is? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Ja
- ◯ Nee

19. Mocht u geen voorkeur hebben, waarom heeft u geen voorkeur?

20. Mocht u wel een voorkeur hebben voor het aantal dagen dat de leerling op de stageschool aanwezig is. Voor hoeveel dagen in de week gaat uw voorkeur uit?

Mark only one oval.

- 1 dag in de week
- 2 dagen in de week
- 3 dagen in de week
- 4 dagen in de week
- 5 dagen in de week

21. Licht uw antwoord op de vorige vraag toe.

22. In de toekomst wordt het eventueel ingesteld dat de instroom van de opleiding onderwijsassistent het gehele jaar mogelijk is. Hoe denkt u erover dat leerlingen op elk moment in het jaar kunnen beginnen met de stage? *

23. Hoe lang vindt u dat een stage voor onderwijsassistenten moet duren? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1-10 weken
- 2-3 maanden
- 3-6 maanden
- 6 maanden tot 1 jaar
- Meer dan 1 jaar

24. Heeft u nog opmerkingen of verdere informatie betreffende deze vragenlijst?

25. Indien u open staat voor verdere toelichting van uw antwoorden, laat dan hier uw naam, e-mailadres en telefoonnummer achter.

Heel erg bedankt voor het invullen van de enquête!

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview

Welkom heten, bedanken voor deelname en onderzoek uitleggen.

Ik wil nogmaals de enquête met u doornemen om er ditmaal dieper op in te gaan.

1. Wat maakt dat u wel of geen inzicht heeft in de opleiding onderwijsassistent?
2. Wat is uw mening over de kwaliteit van het onderwijs van de opleiding onderwijsassistent?
3. Waardoor heeft u die indruk gekregen?
4. Waaraan ziet u dat de studenten goed voorbereid zijn op de stage, de praktijk?
5. Wat vindt u van het niveau waarmee de studenten de stage binnen komen?
6. Hoe ziet u in de praktijk dat de studenten theoretische kennis leren op de opleiding?
7. Kunt u voorbeelden hierbij benoemen?
8. Hoe ziet u in de praktijk dat de studenten praktische vaardigheden op de opleiding geleerd?
9. Kunt u voorbeelden hierbij benoemen?
10. Welke onderwerpen vindt u extra aandacht verdienen binnen de opleiding? Zoals bijvoorbeeld didactiek, of het eigen rekenniveau van de studenten of het begeleiden hoogbegaafde kinderen.
11. Bent u bekend met het begrip gepersonaliseerd leren?
12. Hoe kijkt u tegen het idee aan dat de opleiding onderwijsassistent gaat werken met gepersonaliseerd leren?
13. Hoe komt het dat u die mening draagt?
14. Wat betreft de aanwezigheid van de student op de stageschool, heeft u een voorkeur hoe vaak de student aanwezig is?
15. Waarnaar gaat uw voorkeur?
16. Kunt u uitleggen waarom uw voorkeur daar naar uit gaat?
17. Wat vindt u ervan als de student het gehele schooljaar kan in- en uitstromen op de stage?
18. Hoelang vindt u dat een stage voor een onderwijsassistent moet duren?
19. Heeft u zelf nog vragen of opmerkingen toe te voegen aan dit interview?

Bedanken voor deelname aan het interview, laat weten wat er met de interview data wordt gedaan.