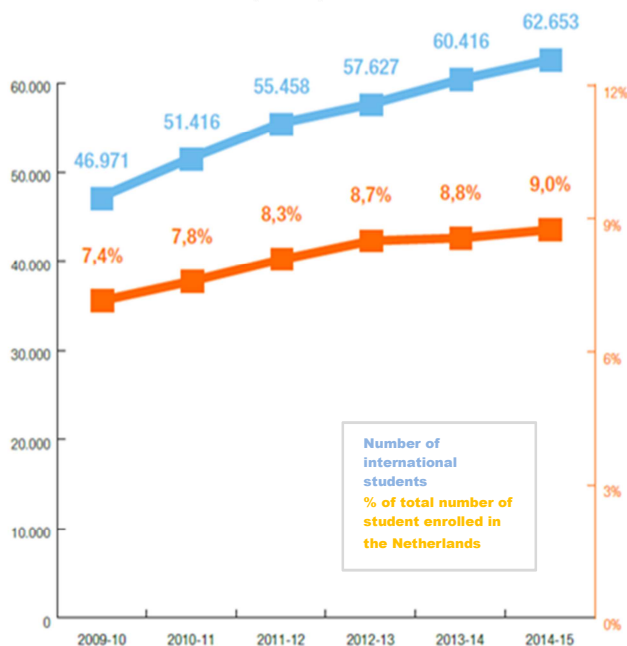


In this first newsletter of the Dutch National Commission Code of Conduct Higher Education, we would like to inform you about the Commission's activities and other subjects that might interest you from a professional point of view. This edition contains a summary of the Commission's evaluation study of the preparatory year. The study specifically tried to find an answer as to why students drop out. What are the main reasons? What improvements can be realized by the institutions with regard to the preparatory year?

Studying in the Netherlands

Each year, over 12,000 new international students (non-EU) come to the Netherlands for higher education. Looking at the number of graduates that leave again, this means that in each academic year the number of international students increases by some 2000 persons (source: Key figures 2015 internationalisation in higher education, EP-Nuffic). Internationalisation in higher education is a positive development. Not only because it contributes to the quality of higher education, such as international classrooms, but also because it has a positive effect on Dutch economy. Dutch education has a good reputation and many of the courses are being taught in the English language. The Code of Conduct serves as a quality mark.



International students in Dutch subsidized higher education, 2009–2015. Source: EP-Nuffic, Key figures 2015 internationalisation in higher education.

Why?

Studying abroad: it's becoming increasingly popular. Of course international students are highly motivated.

However, even they drop out and the consequences for them are often much greater than for Dutch students. Imagine: you come to the Netherlands as a young international student. It's not only the Dutch educational system that is new to you, but you also follow courses that are not being taught in your native language. And you have to get adjusted to many cultural differences. For this reason, and because not every international student can be enrolled automatically in mainstream bachelor or master courses, many educational institutions offer an introductory programme.

The preparatory year

International students use the preparatory year to prepare for their main academic studies. These are students who cannot be enrolled in main studies yet. The preparatory year is specifically meant to guide the student to the appropriate level for the start of their study of choice, for instance by improving their fluency and the required knowledge.

A - too - high drop out rate

The idea of the preparatory year is that it is used to prepare international students for their main studies. Yet figures presented by the Dutch immigration service show that in 2012-2013 an average of 33% of non-EU students did not move on from the preparatory year to the course of study that was their reason for coming to the Netherlands. Drop out during the preparatory year is understood to include those students who start, but terminate their studies before the end of the year or fail altogether. It also includes students who successfully complete the year, but decide not to continue their studies in the Netherlands. Sufficient reason for the Commission to conduct a study in 2015 into the preparatory year and to try to identify the causes of student drop out.

Interesting facts

- Many Asian parents select studies for their children. These students sometimes may be less well motivated.
- Chinese students often have had a very demanding period in secondary education in China. They expect to have a more relaxing period in Dutch higher education. This often turns out not to be the case.
- At least two commercial parties provide the preparatory period for a large number of educational institutions.
- International students say that the preparatory year is helpful for their studies and that it teaches them how to deal with the much more assertive Dutch culture.



The evaluation study

In the course year 2012-2013 over 1000 international students took part in a preparatory period at more than 30 educational institutions. The Commission conducted interviews with five institutions. It has spoken with staff members, supervisors, course coordinators, groups of students, recruiters and management. The five institutions consisted of two universities of applied sciences, two research universities, all government funded, and one privately funded institution. The Commission also conducted interviews with two companies that provide a preparatory year for Dutch educational institutions and others worldwide: Study Group and Cambridge Education Group (CEG). The following subjects were discussed in these interviews:

- Study information
- Agents & recruiting
- Admission and registration
- Academic offering and support given to international students.

What were the results of the study?

The evaluation study presented a positive picture of the educational institutions, Study Group and CEG. They stated to do everything they can to give international students the best possible information about the preparatory period and on how to organize that year successfully. Elsewhere in this document we describe how these institutions operate. The discussion is organized around the themes of the Code of Conduct.

Study information

This subject deals with the issue how students are being informed about the preparatory period and the main academic studies they want to take.

Information is provided on the educational institutions' websites and study portals, and by teachers and students.

It turns out that international students do not always understand the distinction between a research university and a university of applied sciences. Most countries do not make such a distinction.

Agents & recruiting

If an educational institution satisfies the provisions of the Code of Conduct, it is allowed to actively recruit students. Students are recruited for academic studies, as well as for the preparatory period specifically. The institutions consider themselves to be very careful in using agents. Most of the educational institutions send a delegation abroad to train the recruiting agents and provide them with information. This is because in the past agents did not always turn out to be reliable and did not have enough knowledge of the Dutch educational system.

Admission & registration

Prior to registration, the student's chance of success is assessed in order to prevent drop out during the preparatory year. The assessment is for instance conducted through Skype calls. The institution uses the results to assess for example the student's motivation for specific studies. However, this turns out to be complex. For how can you measure this? For that reason, the Commission asks the institutions to share their best practices. The student is also tested on their English language proficiency, for instance by taking the IELTS or TOEFL test. According to the Code of Conduct, a student must meet the minimum test results. The Commission would like to emphasize that a Skype call cannot be used to grant any exemption or a more relaxed interpretation of language test results.

Academic offering & support

The study showed that the institutions give extra attention to international students. The starting point is to organize the preparatory year successfully and to support the students in the best possible way, for instance by offering remedial classes, study progress interviews, aiming to increase academic skills and providing mid-term reviews and supervisor interviews. In addition, the educational institutions as well as Study Group and CEG record student attendance.

In case of absence they contact the student. Several institutions and Study Group and CEG are well aware of the practical details students have to deal with during their stay in the Netherlands, such as finding housing and opening a bank account.

The study showed that, generally speaking, international students receive a great deal of support both academically and otherwise during their preparatory period.

Key reasons for drop out

Why then, is the drop out rate so high?

A support member of the International Office of one of the institutions says: 'There are all sorts of reasons for drop out. Some students discontinue after the preparatory year for financial reasons. Others because of family events or homesickness. And then there is a group of students who lack the motivation.'

The causes can be personal or educational. Personal reasons include, for example, homesickness, but also pregnancy. Students who drop out for educational reasons may lack the required level of English or fail their tests in the preparatory period.

Tips and advice

1. The Code of Conduct requires educational institutions to correctly apply an English language test and the resulting scores when admitting students.
2. It is recommended to conduct a Skype call with an international student, or to have the students take a study selection test. This shows whether the student is sufficiently motivated.
3. Spending time in the preparatory period to have the student become adjusted to Dutch culture is an important investment in students' success in their studies, and in the long term in binding these students to the Netherlands. An important aspect of this is to familiarize the students with the differences in academic approach between the research universities and the universities of applied sciences.
4. Having teachers and fellow-students act as buddies or having the opportunity to join a dinner club turns out to have positive effects, just as assiduous support of - often - young students does.
5. Choosing the right course of study starts with obtaining proper and comprehensive information. The students interviewed by the Commission said that clear information helped them to decide on their studies, as did prompt replies to their questions about their studies.

According to two international students taking a preparatory year: 'A clear website, extensive study information, fast and complete answers to our email questions were important in our choice. It gives you at least an indication of what you can expect!'

How to proceed?

The Commission plans to discuss with the educational institutions' umbrella organizations as to how the institutions can adequately organize the requirement to make an assessment of the extent that students can successfully complete the preparatory year before they start their studies (requirement of article 4.5 of the Code of Conduct). It seems important to pay attention to the students' motivation. Furthermore, the Commission would like to speak with the umbrella organizations how to register the inflow and drop out of this category of students. Since the Dutch immigration service no longer grants specific residence permits for studying to this group, figures are no longer available. Finally, the Commission urges the educational institutions to interview students who drop out. At the moment, not much information about this group is available.

Questions and comments

The National Commission is keen to know your opinion of this newsletter and of the results of the evaluation study. Does it sound all too familiar, do you have any questions or would you like to share your best practices with the Commission? Just send an email to: info@internationalstudy.nl. Who knows, you might find your reaction in the Commission's next newsletter.

Frequency

This newsletter will be published twice a year.

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