

Minutes/ Summary Meeting International Students 01-12-22

-Annelien Bredenoord, Martine Wierenga, Sandra Constantinou Juhasz & Erin van Gestel-

During the meeting we discussed problems for international students that are already occurring now, as well as the preventative measures that need to be taken to avoid these issues in the future. These issues have great impact on the functioning of these students as well as their mental health and are therefore in need of direct attention.

As for **the current issues** (elaborated on in the document of Sandra*), two solutions were offered. The first being the communicational improvements. From the EUR's International office, many relevant policies are already in place to support international students. However, from a practical point of view, these options are not clear nor known to international students. Examples of these policies are buddy systems, close ties to a GPs office and additional funds. Examples of the communicational improvements can be the obliged implementation of mentors (closer to students) which are provided with an elaborate document of all helpful policy measures and how to reach them. This can also be a website, such as that of the University of Maastricht (<https://mymaastricht.nl/>) Furthermore, as this conversation proved, more direct feedback needs to be exchanged between the International Office and the international students, in which the Communication department can play a role by for example hiring students. The better communication of the possibilities will presumably already solve some of the described* issues, regarding healthcare, language, social support, and finance etc. Perhaps @Martine could already provide a preliminary general overview of these policies, so that steps can already be taken.

The second (partial) solution concerns 'small' practical implementations such as providing lecturers with additional English language trainings or hiring translators when an English exam's validity cannot be ensured due to language skills. Additionally, there should be a revision of the subsidies provided to students with functional and learning impairments, and the current provisions should be communicated clearly to all prospective students.

As for **the preventative measures**, the most important part will concern lessening of recruitment as well as expectation management for those who come to the Netherlands. Even though it is recognized that the EUR is not responsible for issues outside the sphere of influence (such as economic recession), it is its responsibility to be transparent and clear about the complications international students will undoubtedly encounter*. Exchanges or studying abroad is often romanticized by society, and especially for 18 year-olds, the difficulties need to be explained well too. Specifically, the issues of the Dutch prizes for groceries and the housing issues etc*. It is also recognized that coming to a decision to do so, such as in '*Do not come to the Netherlands, unless you have housing*', is a very difficult one, since we all recognize the value international students have, but it is a necessary one to manage realistic expectations. Conversations and policies need to be handled both centralizes and decentralized.

Simplified Summary of Solutions:

Current issues →

- Communicational improvements

- & Practical implications
- Preventative measures →
- Lessening of recruitment
 - & Expectation management

***Issues concerning international students**

Written by Sandra Constantinou, 23/11/2022

1. Language

Internationals are often lured to the Netherlands as it is marketed as the only fully bilingual country, despite Dutch being the official language. However, only upon arrival one realises they can't live here permanently unless they learn Dutch at some point. For many this can be very difficult financially (courses cost hundreds of euros) and timewise (studies, low paying job(s), etc). This can impede on internationals socially, in the labour market, and even academically when faced with professors who are not fluent in English.

2. Finances

The Netherlands is a relatively expensive country where living costs are 1.8x higher than the world average. While Dutch students are raised in this atmosphere, many internationals from lower income countries can struggle a lot. In addition, Dutch students receive many benefits such as free transport and student grants which are substantially more difficult for internationals to acquire. The easiest way is by working at least 56h/month, which can result in study issues, impaired wellbeing, and financial strain for many.

3. Social support

Being an international means leaving your family and friends behind. It is a huge adjustment for many, and fortunately for some, making new friends here is a fast and easy process. For others though, the blow can be much stronger, and there is little to no available support from the university specifically geared towards new international students. The decrease in mental wellbeing was particularly prominent during the pandemic – however, it continues to be an adjustment problem that is not sufficiently acknowledged by EUR. Furthermore, students with learning impairments or who suffer from less recognised impairments (e.g., high-functioning depression) are insufficiently accommodated. While provisions are available, application is a lengthy process, they are limited, and most importantly, they are not personalised. Such impairments or comorbid disorders can be intensified for internationals in cases such as losing one's support system or experiencing drastic environmental changes.

4. Orientation

Dutch government services are all in Dutch, and often inaccessible by an international phone number. Government employees also tend to have poorer command of the English language. This causes internationals a lot of stress in the first months of their studies – particularly non-EEA students who can be denied a VISA as a result of major miscommunications. This can cause study problems, limited socialising, and can impair wellbeing. Issues with orientation and guidance / settling in are additionally often exacerbated by social discrimination, making initiatives like the one-stop shops all the more important to have year-round. Finally, it is suspected that the lack of accessibility of EUR's physical campus is not sufficiently communicated to internationals. Thus, if students with functional impairments are not able to physically visit the campus before enrolling, their expectations are not realistically set.

5. Microaggressions

This is an added point that falls into all and none of the previous categories. International students can experience microaggressions frequently, which can range from nonsignificant to a detrimental impact on an individual. An example is when people know you do not speak Dutch but switch to speaking the language between themselves in front of you. While these instances cannot be helped directly, they can be accumulative and impact a person's wellbeing. Another instance is when the curriculum/exam questions are provided in broken English, impacting an international students' understanding.

It could be that prospective international students are not ignorant of these issues. The central international marketing and recruitment office of EUR informs students of expected average living costs, the housing crisis in the Netherlands, and practical information regarding the campus, life in Rotterdam, and the study programmes. However, certain non-intuitive questions are easily overlooked. There is no mention of the flawed and delayed (mental) health system, the poor and everchanging weather conditions (that could lead to seasonal depression for many), the physical inaccessibility of the campus for people with functional impairments, or what exactly the expected average living cost would provide a student. These are all things that could be improved by surveying current students. Additionally, while the central international marketing and recruitment office does not have any growth perspectives or targets, the same does not apply to individual faculties. Thus, one cannot safely assume that internationals are not being sought out, nor can we rule out the possibility of false advertisement intentionally or unintentionally.

Nonetheless, certain additional provisions for current international students could easily combat these difficulties they face. The Living Room has proven to be an exemplary for that. A wonderful initiative by students in Maastricht was to create <https://mymaastricht.nl/>, where internationals can find all practical living information easily, which is otherwise largely inaccessible via Dutch government websites. Furthermore, free A1 Dutch lessons could be provided. As Erasmus University takes pride and aims towards positive societal impact, I believe a lovely way to hone Rotterdam's diverse make up would be through further support of our international communities.

I thank you for your time, attention, and interest in the matter. The international communities are grateful.

References

<https://thepienews.com/news/netherlands-intl-students-treated-second-class-citizens-survey/>
<https://livingcost.org/cost/netherlands>
<https://www.immigrationworld.com/netherlands/international-students-in-netherlands/>
<https://dutchreview.com/news/international-students-netherlands-lonely/>
<https://www.dutchnews.nl/features/2016/03/can-international-students-make-it-in-the-netherlands/>
<https://www.dutchnews.nl/features/2021/04/walking-money-bags-that-nobody-cares-about-international-students-in-lockdown/>

Overview of facilities/support for international students : (By Sandra)

Facilities/support for ALL students:

- 35EUR intensive Dutch language courses 3 times a year – but not publicly known
- Student advisors, career advisors, student counsellors, student psychologists
- EUR representatives / student ambassadors at (international) fairs and online chat that can answer specific questions → in-person representatives will presumably not be available anymore because due to government regulation, active international recruitment will stop

Facilities/support for international students:

- The Living Room and its events (while it is open to all, some Dutch people seem to perceive it as an international-only space since communication is done in English)

What is missing for international students?

- *Accurate and necessary information.* Since active recruitment will be abolished, it significantly reduces the information channels for internationals. The EUR website is severely lacking (a fact that is agreed upon by most central EUR departments). Additionally, information was already missing/inaccurate and needs revision.
- *Accessible campus.* Applies to all students, but in relation to internationals, 1) they are not informed about the campus' physical inaccessibility or 2) the very limited provisions for those with learning/functional/other impairments and 3) new students without a Dutch bank account cannot purchase anything on campus (you cannot pay with foreign banks or cash at most, if not all on-campus locations).
- *Student jobs.* There are limited open positions to begin with (or conversely, they exist but are poorly marketed), and from the positions are accessible to students, a great deal of them require Dutch proficiency.
- *Free A1 Dutch language courses.* There is no reason not to show international students a little appreciation by helping them get started, and it is hardly a financial burden to EUR.
- *Central information hub for practical matters.* Dutch phone lines, Dutch government websites, complicated healthcare systems, etc., are all difficult to navigate around or sometimes even know about when trying to start a new life in a foreign country. A possible solution would be to make our own website or webpage resembling mymaastricht.nl, containing the SUFFICIENT amount of relevant information.
- *More student financing options.* Almost all EUR scholarships are for students wishing to go in exchange/internships abroad and are not sufficient financial help for students that would actually need assistance. Scholarships for non-EU students are a bit better in that aspect but could still be improved.
- *Better assistance in adjustment/more international events.* (Personal opinion of Sandra's who was a covid student for the most of uni – perhaps an EUR-wide survey among internationals is required for this)
- *Better provisions and accessibility of blended education for all faculties.* International students should be able to tend to personal emergencies at home without their study programme further punishing them for not being on campus.
- *(Sometimes) appropriate treatment from nationals.* To avoid intentional or unintentional microaggressions from nationals, they could be provided with some information on what is appropriate and what is not when interacting with individuals from different backgrounds, religions, ideologies, cultures, etc.