

A Successful Start in Higher Education

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The importance of a higher educated society

Institutions of higher professional education and universities occupy a special position in society: they educate young people to become professionals, scholars and scientists. In addition, higher education has the statutory task of promoting personal development and furthering a sense of social responsibility among students. Increasing numbers of students move on to higher education from secondary education or senior secondary vocational education. While in 1995-1996, first-year student enrolments were around 90,000, ten years later it had increased to nearly 130,000. The ambition of the Dutch government is to increase intake even further: the proportion of people with higher education among the young working population should rise from around 28 to around 50 per cent. To achieve this ambition, considerable effort is needed by students and teachers and moreover better organisation of higher education is a necessity.

Improved higher education through an optimal first phase

This advisory report focuses on the first phase of higher education. The first phase is the first year of the bachelor's programme, in which the student becomes familiar with the study programme, finds his bearings and then decides to move on to the second year, drop out or switch to a different study programme.

The advisory report focuses on this period because in this phase much benefit can be achieved. Currently, the success rate is low and the dropout rate is high. At universities of applied sciences, around 30 per cent of the first year students drop out or switch during or at the end of the first year. At research universities this figure is around 25 per cent. Dropping out during the first year involves considerable costs for students and their parents, but also for the universities. Furthermore, it is in any case desirable to raise the standard of the first year of study: students indicate that they are insufficiently challenged, that standards are falling, that they do not relate sufficiently to their study programme and that they sometimes hardly know their teachers.

Many parties in and around higher education share this view. How can we improve the an first phase in higher education ? Solutions lie in the preliminary phase – in the transition from secondary education and senior secondary vocational education to higher education – and in the first phase of higher education itself.

Improvements in the preliminary phase: student preparedness and study choice

In the preliminary phase, sufficient preparation at the start of a student's higher education is a prerequisite for success. A minimum level of basic knowledge is needed to improve their *preparedness*. The Education Council has proposed that pre-university education (VWO), senior general secondary education (HAVO), senior secondary vocational education (MBO), higher professional education (HBO) and university education (WO) decide on entry levels for higher education study programmes. This "agreement on starting levels in higher education" will lead to a series of tests, available on the Internet. Consequently, students can decide whether their basic knowledge is sufficient and can, if necessary, take further training before the start of the study.

Both students and their parents need better information so that they can choose the right study programme for the right reasons. Prospective students are responsible for using the facilities available and for preparing themselves well for their choice of study and their educational and professional career. In recent years, much effort has been made in career orientation and counselling (by secondary schools, senior secondary vocational schools, institutes of professional education and universities). However, secondary schools are still poorly equipped to provide this information and unfortunately the effects of these efforts are unknown. There has been no systematic data collection on proven innovations .

Secondary education and senior secondary vocational education sectors , together with the higher education sector are responsible for improving the preliminary phase. Summer schools set up by institutions of higher professional education and universities would be a great contribution . This would enable prospective

students, after their examinations, to become familiar with the study programme and to take any extra training needed. It would also contribute to improving their preparedness for the first year. The Minister of Education's role would be to provide the necessary incentives.

Improvements in the first phase: a sense of belonging and organisation

An important factor for success in the first phase in higher education is the extent to which students feel they belong to an institution, both professionally/academically and socially. Clearly universities have already launched many initiatives to increase this sense of belonging. However, these initiatives can, in any case, be embedded and extended. Academic and professional integration can probably be increased by intensifying the educational workload by improving the professionalism of teachers and by counselling students in their educational and professional careers. Social integration can be promoted through extracurricular activities and an active, study-related student life. Furthermore an approach is needed that focuses on six different target groups: highly talented students, first-generation students, ethnic minority students, students with a physical disability, mature students and pupils who after passing their HAVO or VWO exams do not move on into higher education.

Reducing waiting times and courses for dropouts

Some students, regardless of how challenging, motivating and well organised their first year is, will always quit or switch their studies. Students who switch during their first year often have to wait until September to start a new study programme. This delay is unnecessary and undesirable. Universities often have no clear picture of what first year students do after dropping out. Providing counselling to these students on their revised study choice is therefore nearly impossible.

In order to improve the experience and retention of first year students, universities should diversify their study programmes, offer more flexible study pathways and deploy new methods of teaching and offer drop out students the option to start a minor course.

Four recommendations for the medium term

Universities are responsible for improving the first year experience and should take immediate action. In addition to the short term improvements as discussed above, the Education Council is also making four recommendations to be realised in the medium term. These recommendations require considerable effort on the part of the Minister because they do not fall directly and solely under the responsibility of the universities. The first recommendation is to promote closer contact between student and teacher in order to reinforce the relationship between the student and their study programme. The Education Council proposes that the Minister will set up a study committee to investigate the financial implications of introducing small-scale learning across the sector and the effects that this might have. A second recommendation is to create a sense of belonging through further integration of learning and living. A third recommendation is to test the introduction of a premium which universities will receive when students complete their first year. Finally, before good practices can be scaled up, the universities must devise more systematic methods of collecting evidence on improvements to the first year experience and student retention.

Students should be held responsible for their study success

The Education Council wishes to stress that the key to a successful first year lies with students themselves. Despite the call for a greater challenge, students must also take significantly greater effort. A greater effort is required, so they can use their talents to the fullest, and in order to become aware as early as possible whether they have chosen the right study programme. Having a time consuming job in addition to studying apparently prevents students from investing enough time in their studies. To counter this, students should be made aware of the long term benefits of student loans over student jobs.