

The integration of international students with Dutch students and the local community

(Eindhoven University of Technology, Maastricht University, Stenden University and Wageningen University)

by Alana Holland, International Student Adviser, University of Surrey

Introduction

The Council for Higher Education (CIHE) and i-graduate report: *Does the UK lead the world in International Education?* and the subsequent article in *The Independent* on 27th September 2007: "Foreign Students: Overlooked and over here" suggested that the UK lags behind countries such as the Netherlands in terms of integrating international students. The report used data from the International Student Barometer (ISB) survey* which was distributed to institutions in the UK, Netherlands, USA, South Africa and Australia.

Objective

The objective of my visit was to observe how Dutch institutions go about integrating students and whether it is an institution- or student-led process.

Institutions

Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) – Education and Student Service Centre/International Relations Office

TU/e is based in the fifth largest city in the Netherlands and has a total of 7,044 students, 739 of whom are international (2006). The majority of international students study on postgraduate taught or research courses; there are few international students that study at undergraduate level as there is currently only one course taught in English at this level. At present international student numbers are relatively small in comparison to the other institutions I visited in the Netherlands and to the University of Surrey itself but the numbers are growing, which the International Relations Office believes is aiding international student integration.

TU/e is one of Surrey's Erasmus partners in the Netherlands and offers a similar range of courses in the science and engineering area. In terms of atmosphere the campus at Eindhoven has architecture and surroundings similar to that of the University of Surrey.

The International Relations Office undertook its own student survey and found that although there was a lack of integration between international and home students, the students do want to integrate. The International Relations Office runs a summer course for Masters students which is a three-week programme of activities that introduces students to living and studying in the Netherlands. This course is immediately prior to the start of the academic year and amongst other things takes students through registration and several other formal procedures, Dutch culture and language training, English language skills, introduction to faculties and an introduction to prospective employment. The summer course also covers training in cultural awareness and several social events. This year a buddy scheme will probably also run as part of the summer course.

Throughout the course of the year a representative group of international students have the opportunity to speak to the Rector about their experiences at the university and also meet with each other to discuss any problems such as study issues. The International Relations Office organises a Christmas drinks events for international students and last year each student was given a TU/e body-warmer as a gift.

The international students' first opportunity to meet Dutch students happens when they are

met in Eindhoven and taken to their accommodation. Other opportunities to meet Dutch students are through the Mentor System run by the International Student Network Eindhoven (ISN) which aims to bring Dutch and international students together through their programme of excursions and monthly dinners. There are also a number of other student organisations such as AIESEC (the largest student organisation in the world), BEST/e, AEGEE and faculty student associations which provide opportunities for Dutch and international students to integrate. International students will shortly be asked whether they feel integrated and what can be done to improve integration. If it is felt that the current societies do not fulfil the needs of the international students the International Relations Office will look at establishing an additional international student society which would be part funded by the university but independent of the university.

One of the main places that international and Dutch students integrate outside the classroom and society environment is the Students Sport Centre.

Maastricht University – Student Services, Central Office/Strategic Planning & International Relations, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and representatives from student associations.

Maastricht University established in 1976 is one of the newest institutions in one of the oldest Dutch cities and chose from the outset to be an innovative and international university. Nearly 10% of the population of Maastricht is made up of students with around one third

coming from outside the Netherlands. The university has the largest number of international students in the Netherlands, with many coming from neighbouring Belgium and Germany. The university is aiming to increase international student participation in both the university's decision-making bodies and in student organisations. As a relatively new university it will take time for both Dutch and international students to integrate into the local community, but there are many steps being made such as new housing and more international student-centred initiatives.

Like many institutions in the Netherlands, Maastricht uses the Problem Based Learning (PBL) method (developed at McMaster University, Canada) and was the first institution in Europe to adopt this teaching and learning method. The PBL system introduces unfamiliar real-world problems or situations to a small group of students where they consider the situation using shared knowledge and experience. Students are expected to undertake self study and then bring this to the wider group structure. Groups are usually randomly generated and participants are assigned specific roles within the group. Teachers act as facilitators guiding students when they meet rather than transmitting information. This close group work ensures that students work together both in and out of class time. Because the groups are randomly generated, students are less likely to remain in groups of their own nationality. Students do however tend to socialise within their own nationality groups outside their studies.

The university is housed throughout the city in buildings both ancient and modern. There is currently no university housing and students often live in their own nationality groups in private housing. Housing for international staff and students is planned and due for completion in 2010. Due to its proximity to Belgium and Germany many of the Belgian and German students return home at weekends in addition to a large number of Dutch students who do the same. Many German students also choose to learn Dutch and together with the Flemish-speaking Belgian students they often find it easier to integrate into local life as it is easier to communicate or get a job locally because of their language skills.

International students do not often have the opportunity to mix with Dutch students at weekends. Due to

this the university, student chaplaincy and International Student Association Maastricht (ISAM) aim to run many of their activities at weekends. As with other universities in the Netherlands university student societies often have low participation by international students and are often perceived by international students as very Dutch. ISAM runs parties during the week and weekend trips in addition to helping international and exchange students settle in. The society receives some funding from the university and charges a fee to members as well as receiving sponsorship from a local café. ISAM have a growing membership of both international and Dutch students.

ISAM has close links with the student chaplaincy, Tafelstraat, which runs weekly international dinners, open house on a Sunday and the "Get to know the Netherlands" programme. This programme introduces international students to Dutch geography, history, religion, politics and art. International students are also encouraged to get to know culture in Maastricht and the Netherlands through reduced entry fees to the local Bonnefanten museum and the English language section of the weekly university newspaper. It has been recognised that students may wish to utilise university facilities during the weekend with a sports programme available on Saturdays and extended opening hours at the University Visitors Centre and library.

The university itself offers training in the form of the "What you leave behind" course for those students suffering from culture shock. This has been a great success and has been fully booked. The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences also offers workshops for both Dutch and international students on cultural differences and looks at the differences and diversity of teaching and learning styles. They also hold workshops to train staff to prepare for the differences in culture, communication and learning styles.

Stenden University, Leeuwarden (formerly known as CHN University before merging with Drenthe University) – Student Counselling, Chaplaincy, International Relations, Retail Business School, Institute of Hospitality & Office Management and representatives from student associations.

Stenden University is a university of professional education based in Leeuwarden, the capital of the northern Dutch province of Friesland. Leeuwarden is home to two other

higher education institutions with around 30,000 Dutch and international students, which make up nearly a third of the town's population. Friesland itself has its own language so international students can face the challenge of using and understanding more than just English and Dutch.

The university introduced the Problem Based Learning (PBL) study method in 1987 and as part of this current students can earn study points by becoming a 'buddy' or a 'host' to new international students. Issues surrounding differences between cultures and culture shock are covered in PBL tasks, workshops and lectures on Intercultural Sensitivity as part of the curriculum. The 'Bridging Cultures' orientation course, written by an international student, has now been adopted by all schools and covers all aspects of culture shock and intercultural awareness.

Within International Hospitality Management all students have a host and international students also have a buddy. The host is a second or third year student who covers the educational side of life at Stenden, assisting students in getting to know a new method of study and offering support during the first few modules. Having a host is obligatory for the student with both the host and their students (two hosts per group of 12/14 students) meeting regularly and completing a series of assessments. The Host Programme covers training for the hosts, a host contract and the opportunity for both the host and the new student to evaluate the programme.

The Buddy Programme is designed to cover aspects of life outside the university such as showing students around town, opening a bank account or registering at the town hall. Buddies also sign a commitment statement and receive training in addition to organising meetings and producing a final report. Meetings cover issues such as culture shock and identity as well as practical matters such as how to complete official documents or where to buy a bike. As with the Host Programme both the buddy and the new students evaluate the Buddy Programme. Although both programmes are for a limited time students often stay in contact with their host and/or buddy and will themselves become a buddy or host. Both programmes require a large amount of administration and rely on the commitment of the students involved. The fact that both these programmes carry study points does give home and

international students the incentive to integrate.

Students who participate in the Foreign Relations Committee (FREC) can also earn study points through their involvement. FREC consists of Dutch students who primarily organise events and assist international exchange students to help integrate them into life at Stenden and Leeuwarden. In addition to the weekend trips, parties and sports events, FREC produce a students' guide to Leeuwarden and give students a welcome pack with local food. They also involve students in Dutch festivities such as Sinterklaas and Queen's Day.

The main opportunity for students to integrate is through their class time, and in the case of International Hospitality Management students, by helping to run the on-campus cafes. As the courses are taught in English it means that all students are in the same position by working and studying in a second language. Students have the opportunity to improve their English skills and to learn Dutch which is essential if they wish to have a part-time job.

University services reflect the bilingual nature of the university with some services such as the Student Counselling department offering counselling in German too thanks to having a German Student Counsellor. Having academic and support staff with similar backgrounds to international students also helps to improve quality and integration by giving students someone else to talk to. As with other Dutch institutions there are relatively large numbers of German and Chinese students and these groups amongst others often socialise and live within their own nationality groups. This can make the adaptation process longer and lead to a lack of interest in Dutch culture and lifestyle. Equally Dutch students often remain in their own groups and seem to be happier to integrate when they are overseas exchange students.

On campus there is an opportunity for both Dutch and international students to have a 'home away from home' with Hestia: The International Lounge. Hestia is not only a venue for students to meet but a house run by four live-in students who arrange events and run the lounge. The host students that run the house not only get the chance to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds but can also earn study points through their position. The house hosts a variety of events such as pool tournaments, dinners and cookery or dance classes. Larger events

such as parties are organised at an off-site venue. The Culture Club also host their events at the Hestia lounge. These events showcase not only each other's cultures through festivals like Diwali and Thanksgiving but Dutch culture as well. Stepping into Hestia is like visiting any well-kept student home; the welcome and enthusiasm of the host students really does make it a homely environment.

The Chaplaincy and Meditation Centre is another place where students can feel more in their comfort zone. The three prayer rooms (Buddhist/Hindu, Christian and Muslim) allow students and staff to practise their religious traditions in a peaceful environment and meet people from different backgrounds. Cultural, social and religious activities are organised through the Meditation Centre 'Expect' programme and include the Dutch language game and the Dinner Group. There is also strong involvement in the community with students visiting local schools to talk about their home country and the Leeuwarden World Charity Festival.

Wageningen University – Education & Research, Central Student Administration, Student Council, university sports facilities and representatives from student associations.

Wageningen University is part of the Wageningen University and Research Centre (Wageningen UR). The town of Wageningen is located in a rural environment with a population of 35,000. The university buildings are located throughout the city and are all within cycling distance of each other. The city has the advantage of being centrally located, making travel around the Netherlands and beyond an attractive option, while retaining a village atmosphere.

The university specialises in studies allied to the areas of life sciences and natural resources. The subject areas offered have an international focus and this attracts committed students. Students from over 100 countries study on Masters Courses taught in English. Bachelor courses are taught in Dutch and attract home and German students. There are 4,941 students at Wageningen and around one fifth are international. The relatively small size of the university ensures that study takes place in a personal and creative environment which makes it easier for students to make contact with each other. The study schedule is intense, however there are opportunities for Dutch and international students

to integrate outside studies through several university bodies.

Like all Dutch universities Wageningen has a Student Council which participates in the running of the university, approving decisions such as budgets for facilities or policy decisions. Student Councils are formal bodies independent of the university and each university is required to have one by law. The members of the Student Council are elected by the student body to represent their interests; in the case of Wageningen there are three student parties. The Student Council generally uses English when it meets and reports, which means that it is much easier for both Dutch and international students to participate; this is not always the case at other universities. Wageningen Student Council includes the Internationalisation Committee, which deals with all issues relating to international students, from the quality of education that international students receive to welfare-related matters such as housing or health. The Internationalisation Committee is not only involved with policies that affect international students and staff but also the international image of the university. The committee is keen to enhance the international climate of the university by working to improve integration between Dutch and international students, improving the level of English used and improving the availability of information in English. Prior to Wageningen University taking part in the 2007/8 wave of the International Student Barometer, the Internationalisation Committee was also planning to survey international students regarding their experiences.

Student organisations frequently work together at Wageningen when it comes to internationalisation, for instance working to improve the information given to students during the university introduction days. The Wageningen Student Organisation (WSO), CAID (Commissie Algemene Introductiedagen – association in charge of introduction days), International Student Organisation Wageningen (ISOW) and 'Otherwise' (see below) work together to provide workshops for international students on social, practical and education issues. The international student organisations also work with the Internationalisation Committee and Student Council. The student organisations have paid board members with different rates of pay for international and Dutch students; this money compensates students for the time spent as a full-time board member

as study can be delayed. It is often difficult for international students to become board members due to study demands; many must complete their courses within two years as they are funded by grants. The high level of involvement by international students in the various student organisations is a reflection of their dedication and motivation.

Student organisations also rely greatly on volunteers. ISOW has student volunteers to teach its varied programme of language and dance classes and aims to bring Dutch and international students together in an intercultural environment through its classes, cultural evenings and, of course, parties. Most activities take place in the ISOW building which is a great asset for a student organisation as students have an easily identifiable meeting place and good access to facilities. Rooms can also be rented out for use by the members. Students pay a small membership fee for either three, six or 12 months which gives them full access to all activities. ISOW also organise larger scale events such as 'Uganda Festival' and 'Egypt Festival'; these events involve not only university staff and students but local people as well.

Public activities are also offered by 'Otherwise', a small NGO based at Wageningen University which is interested in the interaction of society with science. Members are Dutch and international staff and students who are interested in topics such as sustainability and social justice. 'Otherwise' co-operates with organisations within the University and also maintains links with Dutch and overseas NGOs. Events organised include showing documentaries, lectures and an annual cultural day.

In order to encourage Dutch and international student integration the organisations involved have adapted to the difference between Dutch and international student life. Events are often scheduled from Monday to Thursday to reflect the fact that most Dutch students go home on a Friday. It has been easier to have the involvement of Dutch students in the international organisations because the (non university owned) student housing blocks are mixed so students have the opportunity to socialise outside their studies.

Within the university students have the opportunity to integrate when they begin their studies. The Welcome Week includes a day of cross-cultural training for both Dutch and international students in addition to

their faculty introductions. Dutch and international students are split into groups to talk about topics relating to their respective cultures. Central Student Administration is the first port of call for new international students and as well as providing an information point they arrange a buddy system where new students are matched with a current student from the same continent as them.

Both the university and the student organisations succeed in making Wageningen University feel both international and Dutch.

Background information

The Dutch university system offers two types of institution: research universities (39% of international students) and universities of professional education (61% of international students). Of the institutions visited only Stenden (CHN) University is a university of professional education, the other institutions are research universities.

The Netherlands was the first non-English speaking country to offer degrees taught in English (source: VSNU Research Universities in the Netherlands) with around 1,300 courses available. Tuition fees for non-EU students are around €9,500 (£11,000) in the Netherlands and around £11,000 in the UK for a course such as MSc Retail Management. EU students in the Netherlands pay from around €1,500 per year compared to £3,145 per year for undergraduates in the UK. Living costs are also generally lower.

The number of non-Dutch students in the Netherlands for the 2006/7 academic year stands at 49,750, with the majority of students being from within the EU/EEA (25,500), the remaining number are made up of Non-EU/EEA (17,500) and exchange students (6,750). The total number of students in higher education in the Netherlands is 571,750. (Figures courtesy of NUFFIC: Internationalisation in higher education in the Netherlands – Key Figures). 8.7% of the student population in the Netherlands are from overseas, 3% are from outside EU/EEA. The main country of origin for international students in the Netherlands is Germany (13,900) followed by China (4,950). This is very different to the origins of the 351,470 international students in the UK with the majority of students coming from outside the EU (239,210 compared to 112,260 students from within the EU). In the UK the main country of domicile is China (49,595) followed by India (23,835). The largest

number of students from within the EU are from the Republic of Ireland (16,255) closely followed by Greece (16,050). (Figures from HESA: Students in Higher Education Institutions 2006/07). 14.9% of the UK student population are from overseas, 10.1% are from outside EU/EEA.

A number of the integration issues at Dutch and British institutions are shared. Home students are often uncomfortable with mixing with those from another culture, especially if there are large groups from a particular country. In many ways it is easier for international students to integrate in Britain as our visa regulations allow students to work up to 20 hours per week during term time and full time during vacations. This gives students the opportunity to integrate with the community they live in and take part in British life. In the Netherlands international students are permitted to work either 10 hours per week alongside their studies or full time during June, July and August; they cannot do both. Many jobs also require that students speak good Dutch which means that very few international students have the opportunity for integration in this way. As many international students are on courses taught in English their knowledge of Dutch may only be quite basic. The fact that many courses are taught in English does mean though that both Dutch and international students are studying in a second language which gives students something in common.

Student life is also different between home and international students. Many Dutch students for instance return home at the weekend or participate in different social activities. International students in both the UK and the Netherlands do not often join more traditional home student societies, instead preferring international organisations. In the institutions visited the international societies were for all nationalities with some involvement from home students, especially in the societies for Erasmus/exchange students. This compares to the UK where international students often belong to a society directly representing their nationality or culture. Having the use of a building specifically for international students such as at Stenden and Wageningen would be an asset for home and international students alike as there would be an easily identifiable place to go to meet people or join in activities. Many universities do not have the resources for such a building on or near campus;

however such a facility would be especially useful in smaller towns where access to social activities may be limited.

The University of Surrey currently runs the Surrey Hosting Scheme where students sign up to visit a member of university staff for lunch or afternoon tea. We hope to extend the scheme to members of the local community in the near future as a way of increasing integration. Our feedback from current students who have participated is very positive and we have found that the students and hosts do stay in touch with each other. Both the Surrey Hosting Scheme and the host/buddy schemes at the universities that I visited show that these schemes have benefits beyond their initial objective.

Future plans

The outcome of our visit is that we would like to further enhance the orientation and social programme that we offer at the beginning of the year. One of the ways we are planning to do this is by running a pilot programme using money from the PMI to start our own buddy scheme with the current students that are part of our airport Meet & Greet scheme. This will ensure that there is continuity for new students from when they first arrive through to their first weeks at the University of Surrey. We involve international student societies when recruiting helpers for our Meet & Greet scheme and would like to further involve them in the proposed buddy scheme. If the scheme is successful we would then like to extend the recruitment of buddies to all students at the university, not just international students. This would aid integration between international and home students. We would seek to have increased involvement with the international student societies beyond what is already in place. Currently we provide support to the Students' Union i-festival, our two-week festival which celebrates the cultures and nationalities we have at the university. The i-festival held events both on and off-campus taking events such as international dance and henna painting to the wider community.

We would like to run cultural awareness workshops for international students during orientation. It would also be of great benefit if cultural awareness workshops were available to all students as in the universities I visited in the Netherlands.

We are also planning an event for international students with families to introduce them to some British

traditions by holding a summer fete. In addition we are planning to hold receptions for Postgraduate Research students from both home and overseas when they arrive to give them a chance to mix. Our postgraduate students arrive at four times throughout the year and do not have the opportunity to participate in the main orientation event.

Issues for the future

The Problem Based Learning system which is common to many Dutch universities (where students often do not choose the group that they work in), gives Dutch and international students the opportunity to integrate in the classroom and outside it for the purposes of their study. It would be interesting to see whether students at the 35 or so institutions in the UK which use the PBL system felt differently regarding integration than those that do not learn using this method.

At some of the institutions visited students are awarded study credits for taking part in buddy/host schemes, student organisations and extracurricular activities. This ensures a high level of participation in the student experience for both Dutch and international students. Current students have an incentive through earning study credits to take part in activities designed to improve integration for new students; it helps to remove some of the problems that may surround participation in university activities. It is not enough, however, for the students to just turn up; they are trained and assessed on the work that they do. Many universities in the UK rely on (paid or unpaid) volunteers to take part in activities such as buddy schemes or airport meet and greet rather than using study credits. Having more incentives such as study credits may increase participation in international student integration but it would have to be carefully managed in order to maintain quality. More research would need to be done in to this area to find out.

As more international institutions take part in the International Student Barometer it would be useful to make comparisons between the individual countries that take part rather than the UK versus international. This would give a clearer picture of areas of difference or similarity and make exchanging best practice with our overseas counterparts more straightforward.

** For more information on the International Student Barometer survey see <www.i-graduate.org/services/student_insight-student_barometer.html>.*