

Package of measures for self-regulation: strengthening the Dutch language and managing the intake of international students

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Introduction

The Netherlands is one of the top European countries for knowledge and innovation. Dutch universities strengthen society and the economy with academic education, research and innovation. Dutch universities attract people from all over the world who want to contribute to the Dutch knowledge infrastructure. This is something to be proud of. The smartest people from all over the world travel to the Netherlands, and students can learn from each other and from Dutch and international academics and lecturers in an international classroom. Businesses, government authorities and public organisations collaborate with the best scientists, which is good for our local, regional and national economy. The Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) has calculated that a European student generates a net average of 17,000 euros for Dutch society. Non-European international students generate 96,000 euros.¹

At the same time, universities recognise that the growth in intake of international students is also leading to issues. Excessively large groups of international students can impact the small scale of education, the close ties between education and research and, as a result, the quality of education in the medium to long term. Moreover, the strong international academic character of our universities must not be at odds with the importance of the Dutch language. English is the lingua franca in academia and is therefore an integral part of daily practice in universities. However, universities are also part of Dutch society. Students are being prepared for their role in this society, and universities want to use their knowledge to foster a better Netherlands. This means that Dutch language skills are and remain important. The accessibility of universities for Dutch students should be safeguarded above all, and strengthened where necessary.

To make this possible, Dutch universities have prepared a proposal of measures. The universities have done this through self-regulation: an intensive form of coordination in which universities take decisions on complex issues that extend beyond the institution. Together, the universities can ensure that their activities are aligned as closely as possible with the needs of society. This safeguards the autonomy and internal decision-making of universities. Naturally, all the universities will discuss these measures with their participation bodies.

This package of measures is part of the universities' efforts to offer more Dutch-language education alongside the range of English-language programmes. In the coming years, many English-language degree programmes will see the implementation of enrolment quotas, while the Dutch-language versions will remain freely accessible. This will allow universities to reduce the international intake for Bachelor's programmes. Universities will also discuss with their faculties and participation bodies which Bachelor's programmes can be fully converted to Dutch. As part of the package, Dutch language skills will actively be promoted among students and staff. The halt on active recruitment at international fairs will remain in place. Universities will also work with local partners to increase the stayrate of international students, thereby increasing the benefits for Dutch society.

¹ The economic effects of internationalisation in higher education and senior secondary vocational education, CPB, 2019, page 36, table 5.4, link: https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/omnidownload/cpb-notitie-de-economische-effecten-van-internationaliseren-in-het-hoger-onderwijs-en-mbo_0.pdf

With these measures, the universities are rebalancing internationalisation, by preserving the benefits of internationalisation while addressing the issues. To achieve this, the universities need trust, time and particularly a quick implementation of the control instruments from the Balanced Internationalisation Act (*Wet internationaliseren in balans*, WIB). This Act creates legal possibilities to introduce an enrolment quota for English-language degree programmes. Universities would like to collaborate with politicians and the government to strengthen the Dutch language and manage the international Bachelor's intake, to guarantee the quality and accessibility of education.

Package of measures

Universities will implement the measures in the coming government's term of office to strengthen the Dutch language, manage the international intake, safeguard the accessibility for Dutch students and increase the stayrate of international talent. Some of these measures will require the assistance of politicians. Implementing these measures will require time and money.

Measures to strengthen the Dutch language

All major Bachelor's programmes will also be taught in Dutch

Currently, 70% of Bachelor's programmes are taught in Dutch, and 18% of those degree programmes also have an English version. The total percentage of English-language Bachelor's programmes is 30%. Universities will ensure that Dutch students can attend all major degree programmes in different locations in Dutch. Universities will add Dutch variants in places where there are only English-language degree programmes. This will expand the Dutch-language educational offer, and more students will have the opportunity to follow their Bachelor's programme of choice in Dutch. When implementing this measure, the universities will take the content of the programme into account, and the exceptions named in the WIB.

It is important to be realistic about the time it will take to achieve this. Creating Dutch-language degree programmes requires time and money. Some institutions may have to recruit Dutch-speaking staff, or international staff will have to learn the language. A lot has to happen in a more practical sense as well, from translating course material to working with the participation bodies.

Universities will work on creating more Dutch-language degree programmes

Besides adding Dutch-language versions of English-language Bachelor's programmes, universities will investigate which English-language Bachelor's programmes can be converted entirely into Dutch. Universities are seeking to achieve a balance in this. They see the desire in society for sufficient Dutch-language education, but they also see the desire of Dutch students to study in English, and the demand from the labour market for international talent.

Also, it is important for there to be an appropriate total national offer of Dutch-language education. The domain consultations (the national consultations of deans) and rectors will work out possible scenarios in the coming year. Partly based on this, every university will, in discussion with their participation bodies, decide on which degree programmes are to be converted into Dutch.

No new English-language Bachelor's programmes

Universities have agreed not to develop new English-language, government-funded Bachelor's programmes. This measure will be evaluated within two years, and will in any case end the moment the new legal Foreign Language Education Test (*Toets Anderstalig Onderwijs*, TAO) enters into force. There will be an exception for degree programmes that have already been registered with the Higher Education Efficiency Committee (CDHO) and the Accreditation Organisation for the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) due to the time and

money that have already been spent. Degree programmes for sectors with shortages and programmes being developed in collaboration with European Universities will be exempted from this measure.

Improving the Dutch language skills of students and staff

Universities will offer courses for both Dutch as well as international students to improve their Dutch language skills. For international staff, language requirements will be developed and implemented, and courses will be offered to achieve a minimum level of proficiency in Dutch. Further details on this will follow.

Measures managing the intake of international students

Universities will reduce the intake of international Bachelor's students

In recent years, universities have seen a growing intake of international Bachelor's students. This intake has stabilised in the last two academic years. One possible explanation for this is that universities are focusing less on international recruitment and have offered more information on the shortage in student housing. Now, universities want to implement additional measures to further reduce the intake of international students in Bachelor's programmes in the coming years.

The broad use of enrolment quotas for English-language Bachelor's tracks is central to this. This is an important control instrument, as universities will fix the enrolment quota at a number that is lower than the average intake of the past few years. This will allow universities to coordinate together on the intake of international Bachelor's students. Universities will take into account labour market shortages and regions experiencing population decline. Serious steps will be taken for the big English-language Bachelor's programmes to reduce student numbers. This includes the economics and psychology programmes.

Universities want to apply this enrolment quota to the English-language variant instead of to the entire programme, to preserve the accessibility for Dutch students. The Dutch variant will remain freely accessible by only applying the enrolment quota to the English-language variant. This will limit the intake and ensure that Dutch students can still attend their degree programme of choice. Dutch students who would prefer to attend the English-language variant, but are unable to do so due to the enrolment quota, can still attend the Dutch-language variant. As long as the Dutch universities do not have these control instruments, they can only apply enrolment quotas for the entire degree programme, limiting the accessibility of the Dutch-language variants (and therefore the accessibility for Dutch students).

That is why the universities need the control instruments they have [been asking for since 2018 \(link to PDF\)](#) as soon as possible. The universities call for the government to expedite the work on the Balanced Internationalisation Act (WIB), in which these control instruments have been included. Universities are ready to use these control instruments to reduce the numbers of international students in large English-language and bilingual Bachelor's programmes.

No active recruitment at international fairs

Universities will not actively recruit at large international fairs, to reduce the intake of international students. Universities will only actively recruit when there are regional or national shortages in the labour market. Universities will distinguish between recruitment and communicating information. Universities will of course continue to provide information to prospective students, including about the contents of a degree programme.

Putting a stop to the preparatory year

Several universities offer a preparatory year. This is intended for prospective students from countries where secondary schools only offer education up to senior general secondary education (HAVO), where it is therefore not possible to get a diploma equivalent to the Dutch pre-university education (VWO) diploma. In this year, prospective students are prepared for studying at a university. The universities that offer this will stop doing so as soon as the contracts with the providers expire. By no longer offering a preparatory year, fewer

prospective students will be eligible for a Dutch Bachelor's university education, limiting the intake of international students.

Increasing the stayrate and addressing student housing.

Increasing the stayrate of international students together with employers

Society benefits from international students who remain in the Netherlands after their studies or end up working for Dutch companies and institutions abroad, thus contributing to Dutch society and the Dutch economy. Currently, about a third of international students remain in the Netherlands after their studies,² and another portion works for Dutch companies and institutions abroad. Universities will actively work to increase the stayrate of students after their studies. Every university will develop a multi-year plan with regional and national employers to increase the stayrate. This could include stimulating field work, internships and final projects at organisations and companies in the Netherlands, but also strengthening Dutch language skills. Universities will also work actively to increase students' sense of belonging through, among other things, measures from the administrative agreement for higher education and research.³

Student accommodation

In multiple cities, the universities have identified housing problems that affect many students. They would like to contribute to the solution but cannot do this themselves, because universities are not allowed to build homes with money intended for education.⁴ This is why universities are working with municipalities, the national government, student accommodation providers and student unions on the National Action Plan for Student Accommodation. This Action Plan contains agreements to increase the number of student rooms available. Universities are also looking to house students in municipalities bordering university cities. Every university will make local agreements with student accommodation providers, the municipality and local student organisations, in which the universities will facilitate the accommodation providers and municipalities as much as possible to solve the local housing issues.

Universities have a duty to inform towards international students. Due to this, universities point out housing issues multiple times to students during the enrolment procedure. International students are also strongly discouraged from starting their degree programme if they have not yet found accommodation at the start of the year.

Conclusion: package of measures for universities will rebalance internationalisation

Universities will introduce this set of measures, all intended as a response to one or more issues in internationalisation. Universities will create more Dutch-language tracks and manage international intake more. Furthermore, they will further stimulate the Dutch language skills of students and staff, they will stop recruiting at international fairs and universities will work together with local and regional partners to increase retention rates and the number of student accommodations. In two years, the universities want to evaluate the impact of the measures.

These measures will cost time, capacity and money to implement, so the universities need time, trust and control instruments from politics in order to successfully implement this package of measures. These control

² One-third of international students remain in the Netherlands, Statistics Netherlands, 12 September 2023, link:

<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/37/derde-van-internationale-afgestudeerden-blijft-in-nederland-om-te-werken>

³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/07/14/bestuursakkoord-2022-hoger-onderwijs-en-wetenschap>

⁴ Due to the policy on investing public funds in private activities, see: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0045046/2021-04-15>

instruments are crucial to better managing the international Bachelor's intake. Universities therefore urge politicians to make these instruments available as soon as possible.

The universities emphasise that the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater and want to dissuade the government from the radical, generic measures seen in some election programmes, such as converting all Bachelor's degree programmes into Dutch. These measures will have significant negative consequences for society, the economy, universities and Dutch and international students. Labour market shortages will continue to grow, particularly in sectors with shortages. Economic growth will decline because universities can conduct less research and development. They will also be partly or completely unable to fulfil their role as the driver of their region. This would be a particular problem for the economic development of regions with declining populations. The Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) is already warning⁵ about a 'knowledge Nexit'. It will also become more difficult for universities to attract international staff, and this will likely negatively affect the quality of education, research and the international reputation. Degree programmes and specialisations will disappear that are of academic, societal and perhaps in the future also economic value.

⁵ See <https://www.vno-ncw.nl/column/jaag-internationale-studenten-niet-weg-uit-nederland>