

## **Steps to improve the management of incoming international students**

**The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Robbert Dijkgraaf, intends to take a number of concrete steps to improve the management of international students coming to the Netherlands. The minister plans to centralize the management of internationalization at universities and university of applied sciences. He also asks higher education institutions to ensure that the use of the Dutch language is retained and expanded. Additional options will be introduced for the more targeted use of limited enrolment for study programmes – such as for specific tracks *within* study programmes, like those taught in a foreign language. The new measures will explicitly leave scope for differentiation, such as in the case of strategic sectors that need talented people and for institutions located in border areas. Mr Dijkgraaf sets out these measures in a letter to the House of Representatives.**

The number of students from abroad has risen sharply in recent years. In the last academic year, there were 115,000 international students in the Netherlands, 3.5 times as many as in 2005-2006. At universities, 40 percent of new students came from abroad (2015: 28 percent). In some places, this rise is leading to problems with accommodation, a higher workload for staff and reduced access to some educational programmes.

Robbert Dijkgraaf: “The Netherlands is not an island. On the contrary, we are one of the most internationally connected countries in the world. It is therefore a good thing that Dutch students can study abroad and that international students can study here in the Netherlands. It is good for the students themselves, but also good for our society and knowledge economy. There are high-growth technology sectors that are desperate for new international talent. But it should also be possible to manage the number of students arriving here, where necessary. Left unchecked, the current numbers will lead to overcrowded lecture halls, excessive workloads for lecturers, a lack of student accommodation, and reduced access to study programmes. Using this targeted, long-term approach, I want to prevent the quality of education in our colleges and universities from coming under so much pressure that our leading international position is undermined. My aim is to strengthen that position. We need a brake as well as an accelerator – and, above all, we need a steering wheel.”

### **Differentiation for strategic growth sectors and regional differences**

In his letter, the Minister proposes a series of instruments to improve the way in which the influx of international students is managed. This involves a combination of legislation and agreements with the institutions concerned.

The minister expressly intends to leave room for differentiation when it comes to study programmes that educate students to work in strategic growth sectors such as ICT and engineering, and for those sectors of the labour market that are experiencing shortages. He also emphasizes that when developing these instruments, differences within the higher education system should be taken into account. Different regions of the country have specific needs, for instance. Universities and colleges located close to the borders with Germany and Belgium will occupy a different position when it comes to internationalization, of course.

### **Managing the system for the good of society as a whole**

The package of measures firstly includes a form of central management. This will make it possible to look at the whole education system consistently and from the perspective of society as a whole. As such, it will be easier to address strategic issues pertaining to internationalization at the system level, such as: what can society and the education system cope with? How do we ensure that adverse developments around internationalization are identified in a timely manner? How is the demand for talent changing and developing? And how does that fit into the Netherlands' growth strategy?

This new approach will provide universities and colleges with instruments that they can use to manage flows of international students better. The Minister wishes to make sure that options for intervention

are in place if the system is at risk. The precise details of the new approach will be determined in greater detail in the near future.

### **Limits on the capacity of study programmes**

Other steps involve limiting the number of students enrolled for certain study programmes when the maximum capacity has been reached. At present, such a limit is only possible for an *entire* study programme. The more targeted use of this instrument – such as applying it only to a certain track (e.g. one taught in a foreign language) – will improve access for Dutch-speaking students.

In addition, in the event that a restricted access study programme is almost full, the Minister wishes to be able to limit the number of students coming from outside Europe (EEA). This means that both Dutch and European students will still be able to access those programmes. This 'emergency capacity limit' should help to cope with any large and unexpected rise in the number of students from outside Europe.

### **Promoting Dutch language skills**

Mr Dijkgraaf also wants universities and colleges to promote Dutch language skills among *all* students, including those from other countries. A better command of Dutch will improve their chances on the labour market, and also improve the chance that students from abroad will want to (and will be able to) stay in the Netherlands after completing their studies.

The Minister will elaborate on these language measures in a new bill. The principle is that education is provided in Dutch: this remains unchanged. Dutch is and will remain the primary language, with acceptable exceptions to this being defined better. This will make it possible to oversee those exceptions. Given the urgent need for action, the Minister will begin drafting the new bill immediately, and it could come into effect in September 2024 at the earliest. The plan would then be to withdraw the Language and Accessibility Bill (WTT), which was postponed last year. The Minister will discuss the letter with the House of Representatives before the summer.

### **Better information regarding accommodation**

Finally, the Minister wishes to make further administrative agreements with universities and colleges before next summer – agreements that could help improve the management of the number of international students coming to the Netherlands. This includes implementing agreements on targeted recruitment: for example, institutions should only actively recruit abroad for programmes that focus on (shortages in) the regional labour market. An appeal for restraint in recruitment practices was already issued in December. The Minister also wishes more international students to be actively steered towards the Dutch labour market, institutions to adopt Dutch as the primary administrative language (with a policy of bilingualism if necessary) and for students to be provided with better information regarding accommodation.