

Report LUS Club 'Landing in Leiden'

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LUS

Leids Universitair Studentenplatform

Introduction

On the 16th of December the Leiden University Studentplatform (LUS) meeting on students' first experiences with Leiden University took place. Aside from the eight student representatives of the LUS, there were 9 students present from different faculties, both Dutch and international.

During the first months of the new semester, both new bachelor, master, and exchange students discover Leiden University for the first time. This LUS meeting revolved around these students and asked them what their experiences were during their first period. The LUS-committee asked the students what their initial experiences were with Leiden University and what could be improved. This was followed by discussing the accessibility of these provided tools.

Prior to the discussion part, we invited two speakers to talk about their approaches. First of is Mignon de Lange from Leiden Law Practices (LLP) and afterwards there was a talk by Nadia Mansouri who works at the POPcorner of the faculty of Social Sciences.

During the discussion the following questions were addressed:

- *What was your first experience with Leiden University?*
- *What could have improved?*
- *What was the accessibility of the help provided by Leiden University?*

As we found out during the meeting by means of an inventory round, most present students found their first year overwhelming. They did, however, grade their overall experience with 'Landing in Leiden' as positive and are content with their start at the university.

Talk by Mignon de Lange

Leiden Law Practices

At the Law study program, helping new students is institutionalized by not only having a mentor program, but having a clear vision, structure, and budget to accommodate the large group of yearly first year students. The goal is to integrate them in the Leiden cityscape, in Leiden University and the Law program. A good atmosphere is key within the strategy to achieve this goal.

Student mentors lead the mentor groups and give classes on best practices. There is a lot of focus on improving the language skills of students, but practical skills are also touched upon. There is individual coaching by the student mentors, who help the new students with their personal problems, both study and otherwise. The student mentors check up on their first-year students through a couple

individual talks and by reading all their motivational letters that the students sent in upon applying for the university. This way Law tries to give a personal treatment to every one of its many students. Additionally, the student mentors are tasked with organizing a couple social activities.

Even so, Leiden Law Practice is afraid that the amount of counselling and helping first year students is holding the students back and hurts their independence. Aside from that, LLP also is curious if their program is excluding groups from integrating.

Talk by Nadia Mansouri

Coordinator POPcorner FSW

The *POPcorner*, which has been operation for ten years now, currently exists at the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities. It is a platform for first year students, specifically minority students, students with a disability and first-generation students. The *POPcorner* organises a wide range of activities for them to improve their interaction within the university, study program and city. They try to add value to the students' study skills, both via online modules and classes. Because their focus is on students who don't feel included within the regular student pool, the *POPcorner* provides many different types of trainings and meetings to include as many students as possible. Additionally, they provide a buddy program for the different types of students. The *POPcorner* also provides a pre-study trajectory in which high school students in the area around Leiden can familiarize themselves with university.

Student experiences with the University

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The first point of discussion among students is their personal experiences with Leiden University during their first months studying. The students found the first interaction with Leiden University quite overwhelming and sometimes even scary. A lot is expected of the students right off the bat and some students found it hard to create a balance between their studies and their (also new) student life. However, university initiatives like the *EL CID*-week helped to introduce both the city, the university and the student life in a great interactive way. In addition, the last edition of the *EL CID* divided the new students into groups based on their preference for discovering either the city, the university or the student life. For internationals, the *OWL* week was really helpful to get to know Leiden and its university. They said it gave them a boost to feel at home. The internationals did note that there was not a lot of communication from the University before they came to the Netherlands, but it was not really missed as most of their questions could be answered through emails.

On a faculty wide perspective, there were a lot of differences. Most of the faculties provide introductory classes about how to work with Blackboard, for example, but mentor wise there is a big differentiation between faculties and even study programmes. As told by Mignon de Lange, the Faculty of Law provides a very intensive guidance programme for their new students. However, some studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences & Behaviour had no such thing as mentor groups. Study associations did provide some guidance, although limited. The same goes for the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Humanities. The Faculty of

Archaeology combined mentor groups with the course 'Academic Skills', whereby students were guided in their acquiring academic skills, as well as in their study and personal progress.

From the international perspective it was noted that they were placed in mentor groups that were not specifically for internationals, however they were still helpful. Furthermore, they found the study advisor quite approachable and the buddy system (where internationals are coupled with a Dutch student) works well. Other students also noted that a student mentor may work better than a teacher mentor, as they were more accessible.

The involvement of the city of Leiden is only addressed in studies like History or Archaeology through city tours, most by the study associations. This is also sometimes covered by study associations in other programmes and of course by the *EL CID* and *OWL* week. However, there were still some students who found it hard to find their place.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- Set up a mentor system at every faculty and every study program;
- Focus more on student mentors;
- More involvement of the city of Leiden with integration programmes.

What could be improved

The main topic that was brought up when asked what Leiden University could do better was consistency, especially regarding the online platforms. There is lots of initial confusion when confronted with all the separate online platforms that students can/must use when following their studies. Think of *BlackBoard*, *Usis*, *Umail*, schedule information and the study guide among others. Additionally, simple things like finding certain buildings and classrooms can be daunting for new students. One participant mentioned that a clear map or information booklet with all the information regarding Leiden University buildings could be very helpful to new students. Likewise, a flowchart for all the online platforms can also be useful. Master students are quick to miss out on the whole introduction of the city. There are currently no examples of (student) mentors in master programs, which could be something to be investigated. Also, student mentors do not always know everything, which makes them less helpful than they should be.

For internationals the main struggle continues to be the housing problem and the language barrier. Those present at LUS' December Club mentioned that they knew some students who were forced to stay in hotels or pay for overpriced apartments. Additionally, the study material is in English, but everything surrounding the study material is hardly adapting. It was mentioned that fellow students often start speaking Dutch again as soon as they left the classroom, which hindered integration.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- A flow chart for all the online platforms;
- Possibility for introduction to the city for master students and bachelor students outside of the *El Cid*-week;
- Student mentors in master programmes.

Accessibility of the help provided by the University

All in all, students were quite content with the accessibility of help provided by the university. Mentors and other information sources seem approachable, but often are just not well known. Many students do not know that for example the *POPCorner*, diversity office, UB-services exist, and therefore cannot reach out to them. Study advisors are seen as the first point of contact for most students and they are often the ones who redirect students to the appropriate sources of information. Nadia Mansouri from the *POPCorner* mentioned that they have provided a sort of flow chart in order to make the different existing organs at the faculty clearer. They have noticed that students often feel like a number and they invite them for a conversation.

There will always be a bit of a barrier when reaching out for help, but that depends on the student themselves. The study advisors are more well-known in some study programs than in others, and students often do not know them personally. Some programs require a one on one meeting with the advisor, while in other programs that are completely unknown. A lot of students are only contacted if they would risk failing their studies, instead of having a regular checkup conversation with a mentor. Students mentioned that they did appreciate it when they got to know their study advisors personally since this lowered the barrier to reach out to them for help when needed. To do this it was recommended to have the study advisor present at mentor meetings. The buddy system provided by the *POPCorner* may also be very helpful.

Lastly, it came up that sometimes they would be long waiting lists at the student psychologists. The first appointment is quite accessible, but students found that the following appointments would take too long to be arranged or could not be arranged at all.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- Increased accessibility with the study coordinator;
- Make (student) mentors aware of all the different help sources, so they can promote and redirect students to them appropriately;
- Shorter waiting lists/more student psychologists to provide help quickly and not dishearten students.