



Report on Internationalisation

Written by the Leiden University Studentplatform

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Introduction

This report has been written by the Leiden University Student Platform (LUS) and is intended to provide advice and notice to the Leiden University Executive Board, other staff, students or interested parties.

This is the second report LUS has written for the academic year 2024/2025. Our previous report touched on issues surrounding Student Wellbeing, a theme that all students can identify with, making it a highly relevant topic in this day and age. This report focuses on another issue that lives and breathes within the student community at this University, namely Internationalisation. This report intends to give a clear and concise overview of how students at Leiden University view internationalisation. We will cover the views of Dutch and international students' on internationalisation, Leiden University's role in combating it, and further recommendations on what can be done to help bridge the gap between students at Leiden University. We have chosen to approach this topic through the lens of two groups: Dutch and international students.

For the gathering of data for this report we released a survey on our Instagram and in the student newsletter. We based the questions on topics we had heard about in the past couple of years. Furthermore, we spoke extensively with students during our activity in April and with students in our own networks. The survey results and our talks with students were used as the building blocks of this report. Throughout the report our findings and recommendations will be supported by survey results, the talks we had with students about internationalisation and our own insight.

It must be noted that the student voices in this report are not necessarily representative of the entire student population.¹ Secondly, when we speak of a certain percentage, i.e. 60% of students say 'X', this percentage refers to 60% of our respondents. See our notes at the end of the report for more information about the survey and additional notes about the report.

¹ First of all our response is too small to be statistically relevant and it is quite likely many students were not reached by our Instagram or student newsletter outreach.

The report starts off with a summary. Then, multiple themes are identified, and the issues students perceive with regards to internationalisation are listed. We end our report with a chapter on our advisory measures. These recommendations are a of course a central focus of this report, but a large portion of this report is solely dedicated to giving both Dutch and International students a voice.

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Summary

To start off, it is important to note that there is a significant portion of Dutch students who don't have an interest in interacting with English-speaking students. The main issue we find is not in their being international students, but English-speaking. The language barrier is not only highlighted as an issue by Dutch students but also perceived as such by international students. Many of whom who do want to learn Dutch, but don't have the means to do so. The University should promote initiatives that promote language learning and should offer affordable - or preferably free - language courses for international students.

A further step in improving not only the mastery of language, but also culture, could be a buddy system. A system where Dutch and international students get connected and this could foster cross-cultural exchange and promote mutual integration.

One of our main conclusions is that integration needs to start as early as possible if it is to be effective. We suggest reevaluating the OWL and the El Cid and researching whether it is possible to integrate both orientation weeks, as is practice in many other cities and the HOP.

The role of the classroom is undeniable, and it is, according to students, the most important way they interact. Fostering connections via social events for mentor groups and shared group projects early on in their first year can foster connections before a gap too large to overcome emerges.

Lastly, the most important factor in 'bridging the gap' will continue to be active student involvement, within their classrooms, within their associations and in chance encounters. The 'project' of internationalization will fail if efforts aren't supported by a large enough student population.

Chapter 1. Social interactions between Dutch and International students.

1.1. Current situation

There is a perceivable divide between Dutch and international students at Leiden University on multiple levels. This divide is noticeable in the educational spheres within the university, especially during workgroups and lectures, which can be divided based on language (e.g. Dutch and English). When the language of instruction is Dutch for the entire study programme, the interaction with international students is incredibly limited. However this divide extends into the social sphere as well. Dutch and international students do not often interact outside of the classroom and language forms a barrier within associations and the introduction weeks.

Through our survey and the LUS event on internationalisation, we have gathered opinions from bachelor's and master's students studying in Campus the Hague and Leiden. In this report, we will indicate whether these answers are from the Dutch or international student community, while keeping in mind that these might not be reflective of the entire community.

1.2. The international experience

On a social level, international students are restricted in their opportunities of meeting Dutch students outside of the classroom, as most student associations are Dutch spoken. Activities that are organised in Dutch, by both associations and the university, feel unwelcoming for international students.² Around 60% of international students feel University activities are not or maybe inclusive of international students.³ Experiences of internationals who have tried to become

² It must be noted that some activities organised by the University will of course need to be in Dutch due the subject matter discussed, language of speakers or if it has an official character. The official language of the University is Dutch afterall.

³ 30% of international students feel that University activities overall are inclusive of them. However a large majority of these positive respondents are part of the LUC, and this result makes sense in an environment focused almost entirely on international students. For students studying in Leiden the results are entirely 'maybe' or 'no' when asked about inclusiveness of activities.

part of spaces dominated by Dutch students notice an unwillingness to speak English, especially if they are the only non-Dutch speaking individual in the group. This, often unconscious, exclusion does not limit itself to language, but also cultural differences. Flemish students have expressed that Dutch students act differently towards them, for example by mocking their accent or pretending not to understand what they are saying.

International students express a certain degree of distance from Dutch students, often not feeling fully welcomed by the Dutch society. In their view, Dutch students seem to have pre-existing friend groups, from before university, making it difficult to become part of their social circles. The barriers to entering student associations or the inaccessibility of housing on the basis of language further fuel the feeling of unwantedness.

Additionally, language is another barrier that is preventing them from connecting with Dutch students as they tend to speak Dutch amongst each other. This has led to 'negative' associations with international students due to constantly having to switch to English around them. While most international students aspired to learn the language when they first arrived in the country, most have lost motivation due to various barriers preventing them from doing so. The language courses offered by the university are too expensive for international students to pay for in addition to the high tuition fee for non-EU students and ever growing costs of living. Limited opportunities for non-Dutch speakers to practice the language in social settings are also present as a large portion of the population are proficient in English, leading to them automatically switching from Dutch to English. This creates a perception for international students that learning Dutch is optional and not a necessity to live life in the Netherlands.

1.3. The Dutch experience

The "international experience" has, in turn, created a negative perception of internationals for Dutch students. Some express that international students do not put enough effort into integrating into Dutch society and student life. This is

indicated through the low number of students who are actively trying to learn Dutch.

This perception does not limit itself to the spheres of university. Due to the increase in internationalisation from the university, a growing number of stores and restaurants in Leiden and The Hague employ people who can only offer services in English rather than Dutch. This is not inherently a bad thing, but Dutch students feel overwhelmingly negative or very negative (80% in total) about speaking more English in daily life, such as in restaurants or clothing shops. This issue has a larger basis than just international students and plays a part in a broader feeling of 'feeling unwelcome in their own country' that Dutch students at the University experience.

It is important to keep in mind that international students intentionally move to another country to study. Whereas a Dutch student stays in the Netherlands, usually, on purpose. This leads to an obvious disconnect between the two groups, since Dutch students for the most part have no larger interest in interacting with international students and have no expectation of having to speak any other language than Dutch. Whereas international students are fully expecting to speak another language and want to interact with Dutch students and other fellow international students. Dutch students believe that expecting them to be able to - or have to - interact with people in English is unfair, further fueling their dissatisfaction with internationalisation.

This issue is larger than the University and part of a political debate that the University can't solve. However it is clear that Dutch students, for the most part, don't necessarily have an issue with international students as much as they have an issue with having to speak English outside of the classroom.

Lastly, a large majority of Dutch students (70%) do believe that international students have a positive influence on the academic life at the University. They expect to need English in education and often feel international students improve

academic quality. Only a small group of around 15% of students feel occasionally or often excluded within their education because they must speak English.⁴

⁴ This group is relatively small, but it is still an upsetting finding that students feel excluded within their education based on language.

Chapter 2. The Role of Leiden University

2.1. University's Preparation of International Students

The initial integration process begins before international students arrive in the Netherlands. However, students frequently indicate that the university's current approach lacks sufficient preparation regarding practical and cultural expectations. Students at the discussion evening emphasised a particular gap in support related to housing preparation, noting international students often arrive unaware of challenges such as preferences for Dutch-speaking tenants. To mitigate this, participants proposed the university offer clearer guidance through improved informational web pages and introductory web lectures focusing on basic Dutch language and norms of academic culture, such as the proper way to address professors.

2.2. Responsibility for Integration: Students vs. University

A fundamental question discussed extensively among students is whether the integration of international students is the responsibility of individual students or the university. Students generally agree it is a shared responsibility, but many suggest that the university's current role remains inadequate.⁵

During the discussion evening, students argued the university should actively facilitate integration within academic settings. They strongly felt that structured opportunities for interaction, such as mixed-group assignments and class-based integration activities, are essential. Furthermore, international students responding to the questionnaire highlighted a clear need for university-driven initiatives that directly address language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and social integration.

2.3. University's Current Initiatives: Room for Improvement

Responses from both the discussion night and the questionnaire highlight that many students perceive the university's current support for integration as insufficient or only somewhat effective. International students frequently

⁵ 80% of international respondents feel that the University's role in integration ranks as either neutral (45%), ineffective (20%) or very ineffective (15%).

expressed concerns about the limited availability and high costs associated with Dutch language courses offered by the university, describing them as financially inaccessible. Additionally, students noted that while the university organises events and activities aimed at integration, these often fall short of genuinely facilitating meaningful interaction between Dutch and international students.

Dutch students similarly expressed dissatisfaction regarding the effectiveness of current initiatives. They indicated that language-related social divides and cultural misunderstandings persist, partly due to events being predominantly held in English, which can alienate Dutch students despite their generally strong English language proficiency. Students from both groups advocated for more structured, consistent, and culturally inclusive university-led initiatives to bridge these divides effectively.

Chapter 3. The role of the classroom in bridging the gap.

3.1. Use of English

There is a striking difference between attitudes towards internationalisation and specifically the use of English, between academic contexts and contexts outside of the university. While the majority of Dutch students consider the presence of international students as positive in educational contexts and feel comfortable switching to English, they consider the use of English in everyday settings such as restaurants, stores and at home as negative.

3.2. The role of workgroups and lectures

A majority of the Dutch respondents think that shared workgroups and lectures are the most important point of contact between Dutch and international students. This surpassed the role of – in order of most frequent contact - social activities organised by the university, shared hobbies and interests, shared accommodation and informal meetings outside of the university. This indicates that without the existence of workgroups and lectures that bring international and Dutch students together, an important point of contact is lost. This means that opportunities for forming friendships between international and Dutch students are virtually non-existent within Dutch language programs or programs that separate students based on their language, especially in the first year.

3.3. Awareness

Another factor that plays a part in Dutch-international student interactions is a general awareness and knowledge of conduct in international settings. For instance, recognising that one's perception is not the only valid one, or knowing how to navigate around various cultural differences. This is certainly important for all students, regardless of background. This unfamiliarity plays a role especially in association life, where international students are quite unaware of how student- and study associations operate in the Netherlands.

It is also important to remember that international does not equate to European. As one respondent put it: "International is bigger than EU". In recent years, opportunities such as participating in the mentorship program as a student mentor, have had a ban for non-EU students, due to university-internal bureaucracy. Aside from being discriminatory, this reduces the involvement of non-European⁶ students in university matters and stalls the social integration of students at large.

⁶ This pertains to the continent of Europe, especially in contrast to students from outside of Europe.

Chapter 4. Recommendations for an inclusive Leiden University

While academic settings such as shared workgroups and lectures currently serve as the primary point of contact between Dutch and international students, this alone is insufficient to foster meaningful social integration. We want to emphasize the need for more structured and inclusive opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom. These extracurricular initiatives play a crucial role in reducing social divides, challenging cultural stereotypes, and building lasting relationships.

Our recommendations are outlined below.

4.1. The classroom

The classroom

As stated earlier, the classroom is on the forefront of the contact between Dutch and international students. Collaboration between students should be encouraged as much as possible, for instance via the random assignment within groups when working on projects. However, it must be said that most of progress within the classroom will have to come from the Dutch and international students' willingness to engage with each other. The best way to 'teach' this willingness is by introducing these different students as soon to each other as possible. A lot of the points below will delve into this, especially in regard to mentor groups, orientation weeks and introduction activities.

Mentor groups

The role of the mentor groups has the potential to be major in facilitating this connection. The role of the studentmentors in organising social activities could be very beneficial in facilitating contact between Dutch and international students. Both groups of students would get to know each other early on and more importantly would have the opportunity to be 'forced' to speak with each other, without having to initiate this first contact themselves.

4.2. *The language barrier*

Language courses

Another significant barrier to integration is language, both in terms of communication and access to Dutch student life. While many international students express a willingness to learn Dutch, the high costs of university-offered language courses and the lack of immersive practice opportunities serve as major deterrents. Students recommend that the university offer free or subsidized Dutch courses at multiple levels, alongside informal language cafés or conversation tables co-hosted by Dutch and international students. These spaces would not only improve language skills but also create low-pressure environments for intercultural exchange. Such courses were consistently cited by students as critical to overcoming communication barriers, providing international students with essential tools for integration and future career opportunities in the Netherlands.

Efforts like 'Walking & Talking'⁷ should be supported, promoted and where impossible SOZ could work together with organisations such as these in organising events specifically for students.

Communication

Finally, students pointed out the importance of inclusive communication. University-wide event promotions and communications should be bilingual by default, with clear indications of language expectations and cultural accessibility. Small steps such as indicating what language the events will be in, including English translations in student club event promotions and social media posts or welcoming international members with introductory English-language events can significantly lower participation barriers and also incline international and Dutch students alike to interact with one another.

⁷ <https://walkingtalking.nl/nl/leiden/>

4.3. Introduction

Preparation

International students often feel quite well prepared through their own research of what Leiden and Leiden University will bring. However, two aspects continue to be issues: associations and housing. The University does a lot in trying to prepare international students for the tight housing market in the Netherlands, but many still feel they weren't aware of the extent of how bad the issues actually were. The same goes for associations. International students often aren't familiar with the culture and most (up to date) information, even for study associations, is only available in Dutch.

A handbook for international students, with all necessary information regarding associations and housing in one place would be a great start to prevent any gaps in the knowledge of international students.

Orientation weeks

One notable example of integration initiatives are orientation weeks, which introduces both Dutch and international students to the university environment, local culture, and fellow students. Even though orientation weeks at Leiden University offer students a chance to meet new people and become familiar with Dutch culture and university life, they often fall short in fostering genuine interaction between Dutch and international students. A key issue lies in how these programmes are promoted and structured: the university advertises and organizes separate orientation tracks for Dutch and international students. This division sets the tone for social separation even before students begin their academic journey, limiting opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and shared experiences.

In contrast, the Hague Orientation Programme (HOP) takes a more integrative approach by grouping students according to their academic programmes rather than language. This model encourages organic interaction between Dutch and international students in a fun, inclusive environment, helping them connect across cultural and linguistic lines from the very beginning.

We recognise that there are issues with this plan, such as accommodating a significantly larger student population within the same week than before. However, we do feel it important to stress that Leiden can learn from other cities who do have integrated orientation weeks. We would like the University, specifically the staff working on the introduction weeks, to do research into the possibility of integrating the two orientation weeks.

Introduction events

Beyond orientation weeks, students also highlighted the need for structured introduction events as effective means to encourage meaningful integration. These could be structured and organised at both a faculty or a programme level. For programmes with both Dutch and international students organising these events at a programme level would suffice. However for programmes without international students, organising such events early in the year would be more effective at a faculty level. The types of events we would recommend are further highlighted in the next part under 'Social Events'.

4.4. Social interaction and what can students do?

Social events

Social events curated with inclusivity in mind can help bridge the gap. Rather than relying on general student association events - many of which are held in Dutch - the university could host regular bilingual or English-friendly events focused on collaborative activities like team sports, trivia nights, or speed dating for meeting new people. In particular, Dutch and international student ambassadors could co-organize these events to ensure balanced representation and engagement from both communities.

Buddy system

Moreover, students highlighted the potential of buddy systems that pair Dutch and international students based on shared interests or study fields. Unlike short-term mentoring schemes, these partnerships could last for a semester or academic year, offering consistent social support. This mentoring scheme would also allow

students to bridge the gaps in understanding Dutch social customs. From clarifying Dutch traditions and directness, to addressing hierarchical expectations within academic settings,⁸ this could significantly improve international students' sense of belonging and preparedness all whilst connecting Dutch and international students together.

Associations

Leiden is rich in many types of associations: sport, study and student. All of these have a role to play in the continued integration of international students. English-speaking associations such as Leiden United or the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) are a great start, but remain small. It can't be expected of larger student associations to welcome English-speaking students. For the most part, because of their history, traditions, close relations with Dutch student culture they and the fact that their members simply aren't interested in that type of contact. However, the sports and study associations could have a far more important role in facilitating contact between Dutch and International students. Especially study associations, who already exist for a specific programme, have a lower barrier of entry. They should strive to be as inclusive as possible of English-speaking students when their program contains both international and Dutch students.

The same goes for sports associations, who are in a great position to further propel integration via a shared activity. Sport associations should strive to be as inclusive of English-speaking students as possible. Especially since it is quite easy to integrate via a shared activity, similar with what we proposed for the social activities.

⁸ International students sometimes struggle with how to address faculty since some come from much stricter and hierarchical countries.

Conclusion

The divide between Dutch and international students at Leiden University is, as we would say in Dutch, 'hardnekkig'. It persists and it does not seem to have a clear solution. Nevertheless, there are certain steps the University can take to improve the interactions between the two groups and to bridge the gap. This report outlined many of the ongoing issues and set out to provide some solutions. These are rudimentary and can certainly be improved upon, but they provide a clear direction: measures must be sustained and focused on creating an inclusive, safe and welcoming space for all students. Only when efforts are widespread enough and have the backing of a large portion of Dutch and international students, can they be successful. This is not only up to the University, but also its students.

The university is a collaboration of its staff, faculty, researchers and students. It is our hope that this collaboration will continue successfully as it has for 450 years. A connected student population is essential to the university, and we hope this report can have a positive impact on that.

Notes on survey data & other finds

- In total 106 students responded to the survey. This is a significant number of students, but this is a very small number relative to the total number of students. The survey is a good mix of Dutch, international, bachelor and master students and covers a wide array of programmes. Even though the group is small and not statistically representative, the accurate mix of students does give us a good view of the way students view Internationalisation.
 - Furthermore, this does not hurt the quality of the report. The LUS first and foremost is a think-tank that uses the extensive knowledge and input from its own members. Gathering input from students gives us a clear view of whether we are on the right track with our own thoughts as well.
- Around $\frac{2}{3}$ of the respondents were bachelor's students with the rest being master's students. This is an accurate representation of the distribution of students at Leiden University.
- The majority of students were in their third year, with about 30% of them being third years. First year students represented the second largest group but weren't much larger than all the others which had quite an equal distribution.⁹
- The majority of our respondents were Dutch, but this majority was quite small. This means there was a small overrepresentation of international students of about 10 percentage points. Considering the subject matter of the survey, this makes a lot of sense.
- There is a small overrepresentation of Leiden University College students in our international respondents.
- If you have any questions regarding the survey, you can reach out to the Chair of the LUS at: lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl.

⁹ We had respondents respond whether they were first, second, third, fourth or fifth+ students.

