

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science  
To: The Minister of Education, Culture and Science  
Mr. Drs. I.K. van Engelshoven  
Postbus 16375  
2500 BJ The Hague

14<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Dear Minister van Engelshoven

We are writing this letter on behalf of the staff, students and stakeholders of Wittenborg, in Apeldoorn, Amsterdam and Vienna. We wish to address our deep concern about the recent negativity regarding internationalisation in Dutch Higher Education (HE) and the recruitment of international students, and have some recommendations.

Since the start of the new year, various leaders within HE, and others outside have voiced concerns regarding the numbers of international students entering programmes of Dutch HE institutions, and there has also been discussion regarding the number of English-taught degree programmes, and calls to cap these.

Wittenborg understands that you are preparing a letter to parliament in which you will set out a new policy (vision and strategy) for internationalisation within Dutch HE. In the past, we have been pleased to be able to contribute to the discussion, and we were even mentioned by Jet Bussemaker in the covering letter to parliament regarding a progress report of the last internationalisation 'vision paper' delivered in 2014 (see endnote<sup>1</sup>.)

Wittenborg is concerned that the current 'populist' calls to curb internationalisation may threaten an, until now, open and successful policy.

Wittenborg's view, and that of many of its partners, is that internationalisation of education at all levels in the Netherlands is economically and socially essential for the country to maintain its position as a leading and successful economic nation within Europe, and indeed the world. Internationalisation in education is, and must be, led by higher education institutions, public and private, who have the knowledge, expertise and funding to develop international programmes.

The added 'immediate' and long-term economic value of international students in the Netherlands has been described in various reports by Nuffic, Kences, and recently also in a report by The Class of 2020<sup>1</sup>. Although the actual direct net turnover of international

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<sup>1</sup> The class of 2020 report: "NEDERLAND ALS EUROPESE TALENT HUB", produced by The Class of 2020 and published on the 1st of March 2018.

students can be disputed, since EU students at public institutions are funded, the minimum amount of direct economic benefit to the economy of this foreign talent cannot be denied, and that in itself is an increase in revenue, jobs and economic growth.

For example, as a comparatively very small private HE institute, where all students (EU & non-EU) pay the same (institution) fee, Wittenborg itself has probably contributed over 75 million euro to the Dutch economy through its international students since arriving in Apeldoorn with 175 students in 2010. For the larger institutes the figure is significant, considering the average amount an international student contributes to the Netherlands initially through tuition fees, living expenses, recreation, insurance, and accommodation rent. Later, many of these students contribute to the economy in the same way as qualified immigrants are always shown to do, however, with a 'Dutch' guarantee of being qualified. The benefits of this cannot be underestimated.

Economically, the knowledge migrant system, where bachelor's and master's graduates can stay in the Netherlands to work once they have secured a position, is an excellent way to fill a major human resource gap in companies and organisations ranging from small to medium-sized enterprises, to government agencies and universities themselves. The country is simply getting 'older', the primary schools are not increasing in size, some are closing. As a country the Netherlands needs to manage its knowledge migrant system and higher education should remain central to that.

The Netherlands has created a system that allows it to train and educate international students and then allow its companies and organisations to 'cherry pick' its non-EU 'home-grown' graduates. At the same time, it has been able to entice its EU international students to stay by offering them a truly international, diverse and welcoming experience that the majority have experienced during their 'study in Holland' time.

## Society

Socially, international students bring diversity, new knowledge, new ideas, and at Wittenborg certainly motivate our Dutch students to think differently, to think outside the box. An international student brings with them a completely different box – different sizes, different colours, different horizons – they are a 'gift' to Dutch students. As the current chair of the Dutch Association of (Research) Universities in the Netherlands recently stated in the FD newspaper 'Dutch students want an International Classroom'<sup>2</sup>.

Also, it is important to understand that all international students, whether non-EU or EU, will certainly have a different spirit from their counterparts at home who did not go abroad, through the self-selection of choosing to study in a foreign country they have already

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NUFFIC – March 8th 2018, news article on NUFFIC website "International student population increasingly diverse, with the report on incoming student mobility 2017/2018".

<sup>2</sup> Chair VSNU, Pieter Duisenberg, FD Newspaper, 30th April 2018

demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit, a drive to widen their horizons, to deepen their experience, and above all to succeed. These students will bring this spirit and let it develop in the Netherlands, not elsewhere.

It is our view that any society that tries to limit the numbers of intelligent, ambitious, and motivated international students to its higher education system is not a society with a long-term ambition to be internationally successful.

### **Knowledge economy**

As the FD article mentions, there is a 'War for Talent' being undertaken across the globe. To stay ahead of its international competitors, the Netherlands needs to feed its research universities with the best talent it can recruit. Doctoral researchers, and their work and publications, are the engine of the Dutch ability to provide society, industry and science worldwide with cutting-edge solutions, and keep its research universities high in the international rankings. Many of these researchers and their professors are 'internationals' coming from abroad.

Research universities need good international bachelor's and master's programmes, and successful alumni to feed into, and feed off their doctoral research work.

Also, a unique aspect of the binary system of HE in the 'Germanic' north European countries must not be underestimated - the employability of graduates from applied sciences universities is high, and these forms of bachelor's degrees in the Netherlands provide access to HE that many students including international students would not have access to. With its unique entry requirements to applied sciences, the Netherlands should be able to increase international student numbers at applied sciences universities, not restrict it.

### **Ensuring equal entry standards for international and Dutch students**

In line with the above, Wittenborg wishes to report that it has recently come to our attention that some, possibly many, international, non-EU students (China, Russia for instance) are being admitted to Dutch research universities with only a high school qualification equivalent to the Dutch HAVO diploma. It is our understanding that in the Netherlands, to enter a research university after high school, the minimum qualification should be equivalent to a Dutch VWO diploma.

If what we have been reliably informed about is correct, then this is undermining the quality and standing of Dutch research universities, discriminating against Dutch high school leavers, going against the principles of a binary higher education system (also unfairly competing with applied sciences universities) and disrespecting towards a healthy Dutch internationalisation policy. We urge the Minister to ensure that all HE institutes in the Netherlands adhere to the same admissions criteria for international students that is applied to for Dutch students.

## Defining International Students and Numbers

It goes without saying that the proportion of international students in the Netherlands still falls significantly behind other leading study abroad destinations: the UK, Canada, Australia, the US, however, also countries such as Switzerland, Austria, Germany and France are seeing higher numbers of international students. We must remember that a large percentage of non-Dutch students in the Netherlands are German, and although this is the case in Austria, it is certainly not the case in France or Germany itself, or the English-speaking countries where 'international' is truly international.

It may now be time that the Netherlands stops calling students from other EU states 'international'. This would possibly make the national figures more realistic, and be more in line with the concepts of the freedom of movement of citizens of the European Union – in the end, we are all 'European'.

In the list of countries providing international education - there are also 'new kids on the block' - countries like China are rapidly expanding their international programmes and will become serious competitors in the 'War for Talent' in the coming 10 years, increasing the number of programmes offered in English to their own students specifically to enable them to recruit international students. In some master's programmes, Fudan University, for instance, is actively competing with universities in Western Europe, including the Netherlands. Latest statistics from the MoE in China show almost half a million international students studying at Chinese universities in 2017.

In the recent report by The Class of 2020, it is highlighted that after 'Brexit' the Netherlands will have the largest English-speaking HE sector within the European Union, and that, therefore, the growth potential for the Netherlands in building its knowledge economy is enormous. This is an opportunity not to be wasted.

### From a Wittenborg perspective

From a Wittenborg perspective, as a privately funded institute that operates 100% in English, we would strongly resist any legislation that limits our ability to recruit international students, or that restricts the offering of our programmes in English, or even having to prove there is a need to do so. At WUAS we do not see Dutch-language-taught programmes as a benefit to the university, its international profile, or the local and national society in which we operate. These programmes can be taught by others, and we do not intend to do so.

We can imagine that other private institutes operating within an international market, will support us in this. We can also imagine that many public institutions feel the same way. Do not try to regulate something as important as the freedom to increase the value of the Netherlands through internationalisation.

What we also wish to see, and we have requested to you (Minister) before (as have NRTO), is a level playing field when it comes to the promotion of higher education to international students. For instance, at this moment, the Holland Scholarship funding is exclusively available for public institutes only.

This is unfair, as private institutes are expected to perform at the same level, complete the same bureaucratic QA processes such as NVAO accreditation, however, are barred from competing fairly on international markets by your ministry, which is not providing access to national (Dutch) scholarship programmes to privately funded institutes.

Another unfair competition between public and private institutes is the institutional scholarship programmes for non-EU students, offered by some public institutes. These students are not funded by government, however, a number of institutions seem to offer 'top-talent' scholarships amounting to anything from half of the tuition fee to all of it. On informal investigation with agents sending students to these (mainly business programmes), it seems that 'first come first served' is often the criteria for gaining the scholarship. As these scholarships come from public funds, it may be wise to gain an improved oversight, in relation to stimulating the international classroom.

### **On a broader perspective**

To enable the Netherlands to continue developing and leading in the industries and sectors it does, powered by the excellent international higher education it provides to its own students and students from around the world, we would ask you to take the following recommendations into consideration:

- Not to regulate the numbers of international students coming to the Netherlands through legislation
  - o To ensure that all institutes meet their obligations to support fully and house all their international students: 'If you cannot house and support, do not recruit'; for public institutes this would require either:
    - Separate (less restrictive) student housing regulations for (non-EU) international students, for instance, no 'rent protection' or 'points system' (or rent subsidy); this legislation was not intended for this target audience and is not internationally compatible
    - or*
    - Encourage (permit) public HE institutes to use the international tuition fees to provide guarantees (or make own arrangements for) student accommodation for international students)<sup>3</sup>

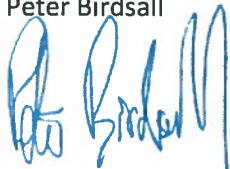
<sup>3</sup> Note: Wittenborg has always charged accommodation facilities as part of the total study package for non-EU students, some other public universities of applied sciences, such as Saxion, seem to do the same.

- To ensure that all English-taught programmes at Dutch HE institutes strive to implement the true 'international classroom', and that this is measured and supported
- Not to limit the Dutch universities' (research & applied) ability to choose freely to offer their programmes in English
  - To consider a requirement for certain specified programmes at *public* institutes to be *also* offered in Dutch for specific (Dutch-language-orientated) subject areas if these programmes are offered in English - for instance, in degree programmes where the quality of Dutch graduates is only guaranteed by a fully Dutch-language programme
- To create a level playing field for Dutch-accredited public and private HE institutes in which all institutes can have access to central funding of scholarships for international (non-EU) students – for instance the Holland Scholarship
  - To ensure that all publicly funded marketing initiatives for non-EU (international) students are inclusive of all Dutch-accredited institutes and programmes
  - To ensure that no public funds are used to create unfair competition between public and private institutes through the provision of scholarships that are not based on open and measurable criteria
  - To ensure that all HE institutes adhere to correct admissions procedures and that research universities only accept students with a high school qualification equivalent to a Dutch VWO diploma

We hope you will duly give our comments consideration,

Yours sincerely,

Peter Birdsall



Chair of the Executive Board

Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences  
Apeldoorn – Amsterdam - Vienna

## Endnote

Excerpt taken from WUAS Self-Assessment Report 2017 for NVAO and FIBAA accreditation of bachelor's programmes, and ECA Internationalisation accreditation.

<sup>i</sup> In September 2016, in a letter to parliament, the Dutch minister of education, Jet Bussemaker, singled out Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences as a good example of an institute with an unequivocally international character. In Bussemaker's letter, addressed to Parliament's House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer), she states that "internationalisation must become the norm". The 13-page letter is an update on her vision statement from 2014 about internationalisation in Dutch higher education for the period until 2025.

Extract from the letter (in Dutch): "*Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences is bijvoorbeeld nog een stap verder gegaan en heeft over de hele linie een internationaal karakter. Ik zie dat internationalisering dus ook op een waardevolle manier onderdeel kan uitmaken van het profiel van een instelling. Bij Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences heeft 2/3 van het management een internationale achtergrond, is 50% van de docenten en medewerkers van internationale afkomst en studeren 75% internationale studenten uit meer dan 70 landen.*"

(Translation): "*For instance, Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences has taken (internationalisation) one step further by creating an international character across its whole organisation. This leads me to see that internationalisation can be a valuable part of the overall profile of an institution. At Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences 2/3 of its management has an international character, 50% of the teachers and staff have international origins and 75% of its students are international, coming from more than 70 countries*"

Bussemaker's complete letter to Parliament, entitled "De waarde(n) van de wereld - Voortgangsbrief over de internationale dimensie van ho en mbo", can be found here:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/09/19/kamerbrief-over-de-voortgang-van-de-internationale-dimensie-van-ho-en-mbo/kamerbrief-over-de-voortgang-van-de-internationale-dimensie-van-ho-en-mbo.pdf>