

Appendix 1: Hand-out

Educational style in the Netherlands

an introduction for incoming students

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Expected differences

Now that you are visiting the Netherlands you probably expect to find that many things are different. The Dutch culture and daily life in the Netherlands, including climate, traffic, food, clothes and religion, differ from what you are used to in your home country. You might have heard that the Dutch behave differently or even 'weirdly'. For example, Dutch people find it very important to be on time. Or that you will be served coffee and cookies when you visit someone but are not expected to stay for dinner (unless you have been explicitly invited for dinner).

You may have studied the Dutch education system and you probably expect the content and structure of the study programme and the language of instruction to be different. The course content will focus more on what is relevant for the Netherlands or will offer a more international approach. Most examples and case studies will not come from your country. You will have to work harder to relate the course content to the situation in your own country, and will have to find out how the course content can be applied back home mostly by yourself.

The teaching and course materials will be in English. Since English is not the native language of most lecturers, and probably not yours either, teaching may be less effective and studying less efficient. Lecturers might explain topics less clearly in English than they would do in their mother tongue. You will need more time to understand the lecturer and the materials.

Although the course is in English, when the lecturers find a highly relevant article in Dutch, they may still offer it to the students as non-compulsory study material. Because struggling with English feels awkward, Dutch students may often speak Dutch among themselves – making you feel left out.

You will also find that your entry level differs from that of other students. Perhaps you have already mastered a topic that is new to others; perhaps you will struggle with topics that are a piece of cake for other students, requiring remedial study on your side. Perhaps you have mastered skills that are not required for the course in the Netherlands, whereas you lack some skills that are much needed here. Examples of the latter that are often mentioned are the lack of selective and critical reading skills and academic writing skills.

Being abroad will often make you feel 'different'.

Education shock

What many international students do not expect, however, is that the educational style too is strongly influenced by being abroad and in a different culture. In fact, students at ITC have frequently reported that they had more difficulties during the first few months of the course due to the (unexpected) *education shock* than due to the (expected) culture shock (Ten Dam and Rusman, 1999).

Educational style is the combination of teaching and assessment strategies that are used by the lecturers and the study strategies that are expected from the students. Many students do not realise that courses can be taught in different educational styles and that the style you were used to in your own country probably differs from the one used in your host university. It is easy to make the mistake of entering a study programme in the Netherlands with a set of values and expectations developed in your own country, culture and previous education. This may result in frustration, fear and feeling offended. The challenge is to start with an open mind and postpone judgement.

What are the main characteristics of the Dutch educational style?

Relative lack of competition

Competition hardly plays a role in the Dutch system. Students are seldom graded against one another. Grading is absolute rather than relative. The lecturer sets the minimum score for a pass and based on this minimum score it is possible for all students to pass or only a few (Warman, Nuffic, 2005). Dutch students themselves are scarcely interested in how they rank in class; many are mainly interested in completing the course and passing the exam. A student who does consider class rank to be important and does strive to be the best would not talk about it. In the Netherlands it is not done to be too competitive or to work too hard.

Your own opinions

The Dutch value 'having your own opinion' and 'being critical'. Children are encouraged to develop their own opinions and ideas at a very young age and to take a critical view of things. This is in contrast to other cultures where students have to master existing knowledge before their own opinion is appreciated. In these countries a person said to be critical is seen as someone who always has something negative to say (Ly Tran, 2009). If this is the case in your country, writing a paper may be a big challenge for you. Collecting and summarising information from other authors will not be sufficient. You will have to make your own selection of available information sources, develop your own line of thinking, and include your own conclusions and/or recommendations.

Brutal honesty

Although this may seem to contradict the above, the Dutch system values students who are visible in class, participate in discussions, and show the lecturer how good they are. In view of the high value assigned by the Dutch system to 'having your own opinion' and 'being critical', giving your first

presentation to a group of Dutch students who are expected to comment on your work may prove a difficult experience. They will be direct and say what they think. Honesty is highly valued in the Dutch communication style, and avoiding losing face plays a less important role. Dutch society is rather individualistic and Dutch students act more as individuals. Showing the lecturer and other students how critical they are is seen to be more important than loyalty to other students in the group. Furthermore, the limited English language skills of your fellow students often contribute to what might seem to you to be brutal honesty. They may speak English rather well, but the ability to express one's thoughts politely in English is a skill that is developed rather late in the process of learning the English language.

Intercultural friendships

Because of the above cultural differences, Dutch students may well see students from overseas as passive, easily offended, only memorising and reproducing, highly focused on marks, and dishonest (not saying what they think). On the other hand, overseas students may see Dutch students as noisy in class, disrespectful towards lecturer and classmates, boastful, lazy and negative. It is a challenge for everyone in an international classroom environment to transcend these prejudices and become friends.

Social equality

A fundamental value in Dutch society is the equality of all human beings. Differences in class, wealth, status, sex, age or race are of no influence in the classroom. The son of a major will get the same treatment as the daughter of his secretary. The lecturer and students are also equal; the only relevant differences relate to their respective roles as lecturer and student and to expertise, which the lecturer has and the students as yet do not. This value leads to rather informal contact between lecturers and students.

Calling the lecturer by the first name is acceptable in most institutes. Use of titles is not common. The lecturers will be friendly but the relation is businesslike, not personal, and does not extend beyond office hours. You will be treated as a mature adult, able to take care of yourself and ask for help if needed. If you do not raise any issue, the lecturer will assume that everything is going well.

You see the principle of equality also applied to access to higher education. Everyone who has finished the right secondary school stream will be admitted. For the few studies with limited places, selection is made by the drawing of lots, with bright students (who have had the luck to be born bright) having only a slightly higher chance than average students.

Rules are rules

The importance of rules and regulations is related to the philosophy 'We are all equal'. Dutch society runs on rules. Exceptions to the rules, particularly for individuals, are very rare. Trying to get a higher mark or an exam resit is a waste of time – and you will quickly irritate the lecturer, and even more so

the people higher up in the hierarchy if you try your luck there. For the Dutch, rules are there to guarantee fair and equal treatment for all.

Independence

The lecturer expects student independence. He/she will inform the students what is expected (e.g. written exam three weeks from now on book X and two articles) but will leave the planning to you. In most institutes for higher education you may even choose not to go to lectures if you think that personal study in this instance is more effective than listening to explanations and extra information presented in the lectures. Furthermore, assignments may be more open than you are used to, with few instructions and with space to choose your own approach.

Literature can be studied in different ways, depending on the underlying purpose. Basic texts may be best studied from A to Z. Grasping the main line of thought or studying only those parts relevant to the topic may be sufficient for other texts. You are expected to select the most appropriate study strategy yourself. The same applies to exercises and assignments. Some require detailed completion, others can be put aside once the essence has been mastered and understood and little more can be learnt from finalising the details. You may end up working late on an assignment while all the Dutch students are long gone, leaving you wondering how they were able to finish so fast.

Active learning

The Dutch believe that learning actively is the best way to learn. The essence of active learning is asking yourself questions that you try to answer by studying. What am I going to learn? What do I know already about this question? Does what I read answer my question? Do I agree? What do I miss? Are alternative solutions possible? What are the consequences? Memorising and understanding are seen as valuable techniques but only as a first step in learning. The emphasis is more on the development of academic and/or professional skills.

Students are expected to study actively. This is related to the high value assigned to 'own opinions' and 'being critical' and also leads to interaction in class and has consequences for exams. Exams will usually include a few questions asking for information that is given in a straightforward way in the book. But the questions that get most points are those that ask for insight, application or conclusions that cannot be found literally in the text. The most extreme form is an 'open book exam', where students can bring and use their books.

Interaction in class

Interaction in class is seen as part of good teaching in the Netherlands. Students are expected to think about the presented knowledge, develop and express their own opinions, and look for possible weaknesses in what was presented. Asking questions is seen as being interested in the topic, not as a lack of respect for the lecturer. Moreover, the lecturers will often ask the students questions to check the starting level of the class or to initiate a discussion. Incorrect answers or student contributions may

be corrected in class by other students or by the lecturer. Lecturers appreciate critical discussions. These discussions, the lecturer's questions, and the student contributions, whether good or less good, are seen as tools to help students to understand the presented content. Passionate discussions are usually seen as indicating the high involvement and interest of the students. To the Dutch, it is nothing personal and does not lead to losing face; it is all about the content and optimal learning. Group work, as the ultimate form of active learning, is often carried out. Students are expected to learn from one another, to learn to work together, and to produce better products in a group than individually.

Grading system

There are many different grading systems in the world, for example from lowest to highest mark, 1 to 5, 1 to 10, 1 to 20, 1 to 100, 5 to 1, F to A. In the Netherlands the marking system is from 1 to 10 (or 1 to 100), with 5.5 or 6 as pass mark. Several other countries use the same marking system but have a lower pass mark, 5 or 4. This does not necessarily mean that courses are tougher in the Netherlands. It can be easier to get 6 in the Netherlands than 4 in another country. It is also possible that both the marking system and the pass mark are the same in your country and in the Netherlands. Even then you have to be careful. A mark of 8 in China is not considered good, since most marks in higher education in China are between 8 and 10. A mark of 8 in the Netherlands is seen as very good, since most marks are between 6 and 8. Only very good students in the Netherlands earn marks higher than 8. Therefore to make a fair comparison between grading systems, you should look at the average percentage of students in higher education who received a certain mark in previous years.

The Netherlands (Nuffic, 2006)			Your country
9.5 - 10	excellent	1 %	
8.5 – 9.4	excellent	5 %	
7.5 – 8.4	very good	23 %	
6.5 – 7.4	good	30 %	
5.5 – 6.4	pass	30 %	
0 – 5.4	fail	11 %	

Educational styles differ in seven aspects of teaching and learning

Every country, and possibly every institute within that country, has developed its own educational style. ITC uses a model of seven aspects of teaching and learning to describe differences in educational styles. Most of the characteristics of the Dutch educational style as described in this article are visible in these seven aspects. Figure 1 gives an overview of the educational style of most higher education institutes in the Netherlands. It shows aspects of teaching and learning in which the Dutch style may differ from the style you were used to.

- Relation lecturer-student: This relation may be more or less formal and more or less hierarchical.
- Interaction in class: This may range from one-way to two-way to multiple-way communication.

- Relation student-student: This relation much depends on the importance of the group and class versus the importance of the individual members of the group (collectivism versus individualism).
- Regulation of the learning process: Responsibility for what, when and how to learn may range from being the full responsibility of the lecturer to being the full responsibility of the student.
- Aim of learning: Learning may be focused mainly on the understanding of theory or more on the development of professional and/or academic skills.
- Use of resources and media: The availability of laboratories, computers, books and other resources will depend on the budget of the institute, and influences the level of practical skills students are expected to have.
- Assessment and grading: The content and type of assessment will differ in line with the learning aim. Grading systems differ. Grading may range from absolute to relative.

Figure 1 does not show in which direction the style you were used to in previous education differs from that in the Netherlands, but it does inform you of the aspects where you can expect differences.

Open mind

Knowing better what to expect in your host university and how the educational style differs from what you were used to will help you to adapt more easily to your new life as a student in the Netherlands. Still, you may occasionally get frustrated or feel offended by these 'weird' Dutch or their strange educational style. The challenge is to keep an open mind and to postpone judgement. You will gradually discover that things can be done in different ways and that each way can be effective. One way is not necessarily better than the other; they are just different.

Literature

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Relation lecturer-student	formal -----x----- informal equal ---x----- hierarchical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Informal contact between lecturers and students. * Calling the lecturers by their first name is acceptable in most institutes; use of titles is uncommon. * Relation is businesslike; does not extend beyond office hours. * Students are treated as mature adults, able to take care of themselves. If you do not raise an issue, the lecturer will assume that everything is going well. * Lecturers can comment on your work while other students are present. (It is nothing personal; it is all about content.) * Students can openly comment on what the lecturer has presented. * Saying 'No' to lecturers is acceptable. 	
Interaction in class	one-way communication -----x----- two-way communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Lecturers ask students questions. * Students' questions in class are welcomed. * Discussions in class are seen as helpful for learning. * Group work is often carried out as a good method of learning, in particular learning from one another. 	
Relation student-student	individualists -----x----- group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * All students are equal: age, status, gender or professional background has no influence. * Students operate individually; loyalty to the students in class is not so important. * When students present their work in class, fellow students will openly comment on it, even friends. (It is nothing personal; it is all about content.) * Being interested in class rank or being (too) competitive is not done. 	
Regulation of the learning process	lecturer -----x----- student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students are expected to study actively. * Students are expected to study rather independently; to do their own planning. * Students are expected to choose their own reading and study strategies. * Students are expected to decide for themselves when they have done enough. * Lectures are often not compulsory. * Lecturers often switch roles: in some situations they act as an expert; in other situations they act as a coach, helping the students to make their own decisions on what and how to study. * Lecturers will give not only assignments with detailed instructions but also open assignments where the student has to decide what to do and how to do it. 	
Aim of learning	understanding -----x----- professional of theory and/or academic skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Memorising and understanding are seen as valuable techniques but only as the first step in learning. More emphasis is placed on the development of academic and/or professional skills. Students are expected to use the knowledge (apply, combine, select and conclude). * Developing your own opinion and critical attitude towards knowledge is important. 	

Use of resources and media	many -----x----- few
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * There are many practical sessions on computers: one student per computer or students have their own laptop. * Fieldwork equipment is available for practical training. * Students are expected to already have basic practical skills (computer skills, laboratory skills, field skills). * Books are widely available for self-study. Lectures are used to introduce the topic, not to present all content. * More compulsory and recommended literature is available than students can study in the time available. Students are expected to have skills in selecting literature and selecting the relevant sections for detailed study. 	
Assessment and grading	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Exams will consist not only of questions that require knowledge to be reproduced but also of questions that require application, combination, criticism and conclusions. * Exams may be 'closed book' or 'open book'. * Marking system is from 1 to 10 or 1 to 100, with a pass mark of 6 or 60. * Most students get a mark between 6/60 and 8/80. * Grading is absolute, with a fixed minimum score for passing. * Rules are rules. Deviation from grading norms and assessment regulations is rare. * Students are more interested in completing the course and passing the exam than obtaining high marks. 	

Figure 1: Educational style in higher education in the Netherlands