

Student counselling at Utrecht University*

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Abstract. The enormous increase in the number of students at Dutch universities in the sixties and seventies made it impossible for professors to deal with the many different questions students confronted them with. New professionals, student counsellors/psychologists and student advisers entered the universities. Three levels of counselling can be distinguished:

- 1) counselling by professors (for problems linked with the course of study);
- 2) counselling by student advisers in the faculty or department (for problems concerning study planning);
- 3) counselling by student counsellors/psychologists (for other – e.g., personal problems).

This article focuses on the activities of the student counsellors/psychologists.

Measures taken by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in the past ten years to cut down expenses created a severe deterioration of the students' situation (e.g., the limitation of the right to a grant from a period of six years in 1990 to a period of four years in 1996, the lowering of the donation part of the grant, and a restriction of the duration of the studies). As a consequence students feel they are under great pressure. Students therefore need to be well informed about rules and regulations. Counsellors try to limit "drop-out" rate as much as possible. Maintaining a high standard of facilities at Utrecht University (such as student counselling, a broad range of student societies and adequate information service) will be the challenge for the future.

A brief history of Utrecht University

Utrecht University is one of the thirteen Dutch universities and has deep historical roots. Its origins lie in the early Middle Ages and are linked closely with the history of Utrecht itself. Willibrordus, a missionary from the north of England, became the first bishop of Utrecht. He established a seminary in 700 AD for English missionaries, future priests and the sons of nobles. From the 11th century, the seminary was connected to the cathedral. This seminary, where initially only priests were educated, gradually broadened its curriculum to train administrators, lawyers, medical doctors, etc. From the 12th to the 16th centuries, Utrecht remained the intellectual and cultural centre of the Northern Netherlands. In 1579, the famed Union of Utrecht, the 'constitution' of the present Kingdom of the Netherlands, was signed in the large chapter

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house which is now the university auditorium. The formal establishment of a university came about relatively late. It was not until 1634 that Utrecht established an "Illustrious School", and two years later the States of Utrecht officially declared the school a university. The opening took place on March 26, 1636. The official university had a staff of seven professors who taught in four different faculties, Theology, Law, Medicine and Philosophy. In 1815 the university became a state institution with five faculties. The faculty of Philosophy was split into two faculties: one comprising Mathematics and Physics, and the other consisting of Philosophy and Humanities. In 1925 the Veterinary School became the sixth faculty.

On its 355th anniversary in 1991, Utrecht University had over 24,000 students and employed about 400 professors, teaching in 14 different faculties. In January 1995 Utrecht University had 25,125 undergraduate students of which 58% were female (Utrecht University; 1995).

Utrecht and student facilities

The city of Utrecht and Utrecht University create a comfortable climate for students. Utrecht has a bustling student community, which offers many opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Utrecht has a lively city centre, various student societies and many sports and cultural facilities. Utrecht University believes that good student facilities are very important for a student's well-being. In 1994 and 1995 two major projects were completed, a new sports centre called "Olympos", situated in the university centre the "Uithof" and a new International and Cultural Centre, called "Parnassos", in the old city. This centre houses academics and students from abroad and also accommodates music and theatre facilities.

Student counselling on three different levels

In the sixties and seventies the number of students in Dutch universities grew enormously. Before World War II student counselling was provided by professors. Questions of students could be about curricula, study planning, examinations, personal problems, deferment of military service, etc. The growing number of students made it impossible for professors to answer all the questions students confronted them with. The increase in the number of students and their problems brought new employees to universities: student advisers, student psychologists, student counsellors, careers advisory officers and university medical officers. The main focus in this article lies on counselling activities of student counsellors and student psychologists of the department of Student Affairs. This focus does not mean that student counselling at Utrecht University is exclusively done by employees of a central department. Professors and student advisers within the faculties have of course guidance

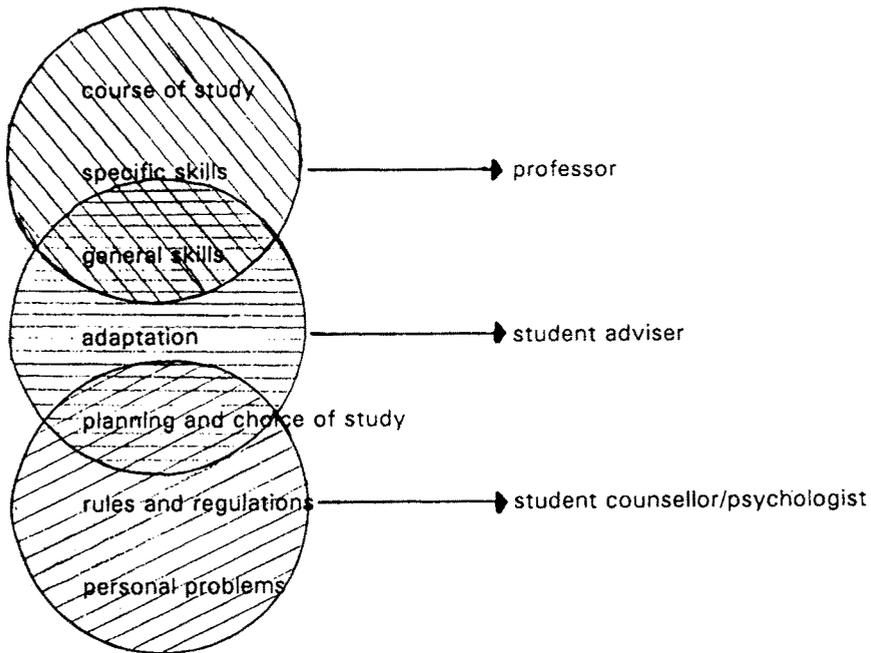


Figure 1. Areas of students' concerns and corresponding advisers.

tasks as well. The student question determines the type of guidance. The different types may of course overlap (see Figure 1).

If questions or problems are linked with the course of study, students should contact a professor within their own department. Questions that are clearly connected to the planning of the study can be answered best by student advisers in the faculty. On the other hand problems that have no connection at all to the course of study, e.g., fear of speaking in public, are dealt with by student counsellors or student psychologists. The description of the counselling situation is an ideal one. Especially the counselling activities of professors differ strongly in the fourteen faculties. Students may complain for example, that a number of professors is more interested in research than in teaching or the results of their students.

The Department of Student Affairs at Utrecht University

The Department of Student Affairs is a central facility of Utrecht University. It employs five student psychologists and eight student counsellors.¹ Over 25,000 students from 14 faculties can discuss matters of importance to them with the psychologists or the student counsellors. The student counsellors can be consulted about: grants, deferment of military service, admission

request on the basis of foreign diplomas, study facilities for disabled students, facilities for students who combine their studies with top-class sport, etc. The student psychologists are available to discuss any personal problems students may encounter. Students with problems that cannot be solved within a reasonable period of time have to be referred to specialists outside the university. Student psychologists organise group activities for students who are temporarily stuck in their studies or for students who need training in social skills. The co-operation between student psychologists and student counsellors in the Department of Student Affairs and student advisers in the faculties ensures timely help for students. Once a week student psychologists and student counsellors meet to discuss new developments and the most frequent student problems.

Furthermore the Department of Student Affairs has an important task in supporting the Board of Utrecht University in policy development in the field of student affairs. Besides advising the Board of Utrecht University, the Department of Student Affairs informs student advisers in the faculties about the consequences of certain changes in the law. The student advisers in their turn give information about curricula and examination facilities, and advise students how to plan their studies.

Student societies get as much assistance as possible from Utrecht University (subsidy for activities, housing facilities, financial aid for board members of student societies, relevant information from the Department of Student Affairs, etc.) in order to create a good study climate.

The influence of recent political developments on student facilities in Dutch higher education

In the past two decades Dutch higher education has had to cope with severe economy measures by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Though the names of these ministerial economy measures suggested that there was a balance between the cutting of "non-viable" studies (e.g., the Humanities) and the promoting of "viable" studies (e.g., the Sciences), the main aim was to cut expenses in Dutch higher education. As a result of two major economy operations most Dutch universities and especially the traditional universities as opposed to the universities that were formerly polytechnics, were forced to focus on their primary tasks: education and research.

Activities or facilities undertaken in the period after World War II such as student housing, medical and pastoral care, etc. had to be dropped. These activities or facilities were no longer considered to be primary university tasks. Although the work of the Department of Student Affairs at Utrecht University, student psychologists and student counsellors, is not considered to be a primary facility, it got off scot-free. However, it is no longer customary now to provide long-term therapeutic help. Students who need this kind of help are referred to specialists outside Utrecht University.

The (new) Dutch Higher Education and Research Act and the Study Grants Act

On September 1, 1993 the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) came into force (Ministry of Education and Science, 1993).² This act created a new situation for students in the Netherlands. The consequences of this new act cannot be dissociated from another important act: the Study Grant Act which dates from 1986. These two important acts make use of the following concepts:

1. duration of study,
2. duration of registration and
3. the right to a study grant.

Duration of study

In Dutch higher education the duration of study is measured in study credits. One credit stands for 40 hours of study a week and one year consists of 42 credits. A course of studies comprises 168 credits, which means that it takes at least four years to finish a study. Most studies in the Netherlands are 168-credit studies. There are however some exceptions such as the studies of Medicine, Pharmacy and Veterinary Medicine, which comprise 252 credits. The postgraduate teacher training courses take up one year and are equivalent to 42 credits. Admission is granted only after obtaining a Master's degree in one's own field of study. However since the number of places available is limited, not everyone who applies can be admitted. The same goes for the studies of Dentistry, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine.

Duration of registration

Registration for a 168-credit study is possible for a maximum of six years. For a 252-credit study however a student can register for 8 years. Registration as a student is absolutely necessary in order to be eligible for a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Education. So, for example, a mathematics student who after three years switches to psychology can register at the Psychology department for another three years at most. After that he is allowed to finish his Psychology studies as an "auditor" (an "auditor" pays higher tuition fees and is not eligible for a grant).

Grants

For a 168-credit study one gets a grant for 5 years at most. A grant consists of three parts:

- a. a donation of Fl. 470³ per month (in 1996 this was lowered to Fl. 425);
- b. a student can take out a loan, when s/he needs more than this to pay for expenses;

- c. a supplementary grant for students whose parents' income is less than average (Parents are expected to support their studying children).

Students from the faculties of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy are entitled to a grant for a period of 7 years. If they need one extra year to finish their studies they can take out a loan from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but they will have to pay interest over it. Students who reach the age of 27 lose the donation part of the grant. After the age of 27 they are not eligible for a grant at all.

Thus in Dutch higher education we have a complicated situation in which students are allowed to spend 6 years on a 4-year study. However, their right to a grant extends over a period of 5 years at most. Before July 1991 students were automatically entitled to a grant for a period of 6 years. As a result of the ministry's economy measures this was reduced to 5 years. Until now students usually finished their studies in 5.5 or 6 years. Now, if they do not finish their studies more quickly they are faced with severe financial problems in the final stage of their studies.

In the academic year 1993–1994 the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science introduced a new measure to limit the length of a student's stay at university. Since then students have had to demonstrate a certain progress in their studies. If a student does not succeed in obtaining a required 25%⁴ of his/her credits, the donation of the grant will be converted into a loan on which interest is charged. Repayment must be started two years after graduation. And there are other complications.

Those students who begin their study some years after obtaining their secondary school diploma, have financial problems as well. For example a student who starts to study Medicine at the age of 23 will lose the donation part at the age of 27 and will have to borrow the full amount of the grant. So a student who, after finishing studies at a higher professional institute,⁵ wants to obtain a university degree, is entitled to a grant for a period of one year at most.

A new study grant act will probably come into force in the academic year 1996–1997. As a result of this "achievement grant measure" (in Dutch: "prestatiebeurs") a student will have a grant for a maximum of four years instead of for five years. A student who then cannot obtain a Master's degree within 6 years, will lose the donation part completely, because the donation will be converted into a loan on which interest is charged. So in a relatively short period the situation has deteriorated considerably. The student generation of 1990 had a grant for a maximum of six years. The students who started in September 1991 had a grant for a maximum of five years and the students who will start in September 1996 will probably have a grant for four years at most.

It goes without saying that all these measures have a serious impact on the students' well-being and will continue to do so. In former days (the seventies until the mid-eighties) one could find in Dutch higher education

the so called "eternal students". The successive measures of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science did not fail to eliminate this phenomenon. From 1990 on they were no longer entitled to a grant. The ministerial efforts to limit the length of a student's stay in higher education, mainly through economy measures, also led to an awareness among students of the high cost of their stay in higher education. This was however not the only effect. Nowadays students worry about how personal problems or the wrong choice of study will affect their study progress.

Therefore the Department of Student Affairs of Utrecht University encourages students to contact them as soon as they feel they need help. The Department works closely together with the student advisers in the faculties. Most of the time student advisers and professors are the first ones to perceive problems, because students discuss their problems more easily with a student counsellor or professor in their own faculty. In many cases appointments with student psychologists or student counsellors were made because students were referred to them by a student adviser. Every student psychologist and student counsellor has a number of faculties in portfolio and has regular contacts with the student advisers concerned.

Activities of student psychologists

One of the primary aims of the student psychologists is to provide guidance in order to prevent (further) study delay and to increase study output. The work of the student psychologists (5, equivalent to 3.4 full-time jobs) at the Department of Student Affairs can be divided into two main activities:

- a. Counselling of individual students;
- b. Organising training for groups of students who have the same problems.

We present data from the annual reports (not published) of the student psychologists from 1990 and later. Table 1 shows the four categories of problems which were mentioned by students in their first contact with the psychologists.

During three successive years we saw a rather constant distribution of problems. Depending upon the kind of problem individual or group activities were undertaken. In cases where individual counselling was the most appropriate form of help, the average number of consultations over the years was 6. In 1990, 129 students were referred to specialists outside Utrecht University. The largest group of problems, in this case problems concerning study, is subdivided into three categories (see Table 2).

Table 1. Problems reported by students during first interview, by year.

Problem Areas	Year		
	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93
Emotional problems	36%	35%	41%
Psychosomatic problems	11%	9%	10%
Problems related to studies	42%	50%	46%
Other problems	11%	6%	3%

Table 2. Problems related to studies cited by students, by year.

Type of Problem	Year		
	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93
Problems related to study progress	54%	54%	54%
Problems related to study choice and study motivation	23%	22%	22%
Other problems (e.g., fear of speaking in public)	23%	24%	24%

Group activities organised by student psychologists

In the final stage of their studies students sometimes get stuck. For these students the psychologists organise the 'graduate students group'. During the whole of their final year students can enrol in this course, which focuses on:

1. making a weekly plan and sticking to it;
2. tracing the cause(s) of study delay.

The length of the course is variable.

For those students who are in the initial or the middle stage of their studies and who lack discipline, student psychologists organise the 'tutorial group'. This is a 20-week course with students and psychologist meeting once a week. Students must set themselves a goal every week and continually check their progress.

Students who lack confidence in (small) groups, who suffer from fear of speaking in public, who have problems making contacts with fellow students or supervisors can participate in a 'training in social skills'. This course is held twice a year and lasts for 8 weeks, with one meeting a week.

Students who doubt if they chose the right study, can enrol in the 'study choice group'. This training, a co-operation between psychologists, student counsellors and a careers advisory officer, lasts for three weeks, with one meeting a week. Information and advice is given on courses of study, choice

of study, legal regulations concerning grants, etc. Every month a new group starts.

Apart from these activities Utrecht University has a separate department where students can train their study skills (IVLOS).

Activities of student counsellors

The student counsellors (8, equivalent to 7.0 full-time jobs) at the Department of Student Affairs deal with a great variety of problems. The main aim of the student counsellors is quite similar to that of the student psychologists: the guidance of students resulting in a decrease in study delay and an increase in study output.

Many of the problems of individual students have to do with their legal status. A student's legal status is affected by:

- a. loss of grant after 5 years of registration;
- b. extra facilities for disabled students;
- c. extra facilities for students who combine top-class sport and study;
- d. foreign background (foreign diploma, visa, etc.).

For all these problems students consult student counsellors. In many cases student counsellors act as intermediaries between students and other institutions. As an example, a student counsellor can apply for a donation from a private fund on behalf of a student who is no longer entitled to a grant because s/he has reached the age of 27. Or student counsellors can refer a student who thinks s/he is dyslectic to an outpatient clinic where s/he can be tested.

The student counsellors' department is however not the first place where students try to find answers to their questions. The Information desk for Students is a primary facility for students, and the staff of the Information desk for Students are informed about rules and regulations by the student counsellors. Students with, for example, questions concerning their grant have to contact the Information desk for Students first. In nine out of ten cases the staff of the Information desk can give them a clear answer. In cases where this is not possible, students are referred to the student counsellors. Thus the student counsellors' department is a second-line facility.

New Dutch higher education acts will always have consequences for both universities and students. Therefore they are studied by the legal advisers in the department before they come into force. In this way unintentional side-effects can be detected and subsequently pointed out to the minister by means of a letter from the Board of Utrecht University. The department keeps the Board advised about the most important student affairs.

This brings us to the last activities of the student counsellors in the Department of Student Affairs. Utrecht University and the Department of Student Affairs in particular, appreciate good contacts with student societies,

whether they focus on sociability, sports, international exchange of students, music, etc. As stated before, Utrecht University believes that good student facilities have a positive effect on both study climate and students' well-being. Academic training does not take place inside university buildings only but also outside, for example, through activities organised by student societies. The student counsellors of the Department of Student Affairs have contacts with most of the student societies in Utrecht. Important information is sent directly to the student societies, who in their turn pass on this information to their members. The student societies are organised in eight federations according to activities or fields of interest. These federations (united in the Consultative Body Student Policy of Utrecht University/OSRU, set up in 1988) meet once a month to discuss problems and ministerial plans or measures which may affect both individual students and student societies. OSRU acts in two directions, informing and representing its members as well as advising the Board of the University on student affairs. OSRU gets its information about ministerial plans through the Department of Student Affairs.

Conclusion

Due to the enormous increase in the number of students in Dutch higher education the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has taken several economy measures in the last two decades. These operations have led to a reshuffling of universities, faculties and educational departments, resulting in a great number of redundancies.

Students, too, saw a marked deterioration of their situation: the minister put a limit to their right to a grant as well as to the duration of their stay at university. They now feel under great pressure, because study delay may cause huge financial problems. All this underlines the need for expert information about rules and regulations.

Thus all institutions in higher education are now faced with the challenge to soften the blow for their students and to maintain a good study climate. If Utrecht University fails to meet this challenge, more and more students will encounter financial problems, and this fact will probably lead to a higher dropout rate.

Utrecht University endeavours to maintain the high standard of its facilities for students, whether they are young or mature, the disabled or athletes or belong to an ethnic minority. In spite of the bad housing situation in the city Utrecht University is still popular among students. We believe that the facilities the university offers contribute considerably to this popularity.

Nevertheless student drop-out is a frequent phenomenon. Especially in faculties with great numbers of freshmen (e.g., the faculties of Law, Social Sciences, Arts) the drop-out rate is high. It is not really clear why these students quit university. The reasons most mentioned are:

- a. the study did not match the student's expectations;
- b. the study proved too difficult.

In October 1995 a pilot project was started in order to get a clearer picture of this problem, the results of which are not yet known. In the same month the Faculty of Law decided to start a tutorial system for their freshmen. This will probably decrease the number of students that drop out.

Notes

1. We prefer the use of the term "student counsellor" instead of "student adviser". It enables us to differentiate between the work of a central counselling service (student counsellor) and a faculty counselling service (student adviser). In contrast to student advisers, student counsellors deal with problems that are not in the first place connected with a specific course of studies.
2. In 1994 the Department of Culture was added to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.
3. One Dutch guilder is about 0.75 American dollars.
4. Beginning in 1995-96 the requirement is raised to 50%.
5. Minimum duration of study is four years.

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