

Guidelines for the support and guidance of international students

Introduction

By signing the "Code of Conduct International Students"¹ Fontys has committed itself to agreements reached by (representatives of) institutions for higher education in respect of contacts with international students.

Because Fontys receives increasing numbers of international students every year, Fontys would like to give additional care and attention to their well-being and prevent them from incurring study delays or becoming isolated.² To help institutions with the operationalisation of this code of conduct, Fontys has drafted a number of guidelines to serve as tools for offering an acceptable basic level of support and guidance to international students.

Experience has shown that international students often require additional attention and guidance to make them feel at home and to make studying at Fontys a positive experience. After all, these students are already taking an enormous step by coming to the Netherlands. For most of them this is an unknown country and they have to become acquainted with the educational institute and the Dutch educational system as well as starting their study programme - all within a short period of time. This is not always easy, especially when you consider that in addition to organising their study, the students also have to organise all kinds of practical matters in the Netherlands and build up a (new) social life and network.

International students' stay abroad (as part of their studies) comprises four phases: arrival, start of studies, the remaining study period, and departure. Guidance by Fontys focuses mainly on the first six months, as this is the period during which international students particularly require additional support and guidance. After all, the culture shock students experience already starts before they leave their own country, which results in tension and insecurity.³

Student journey

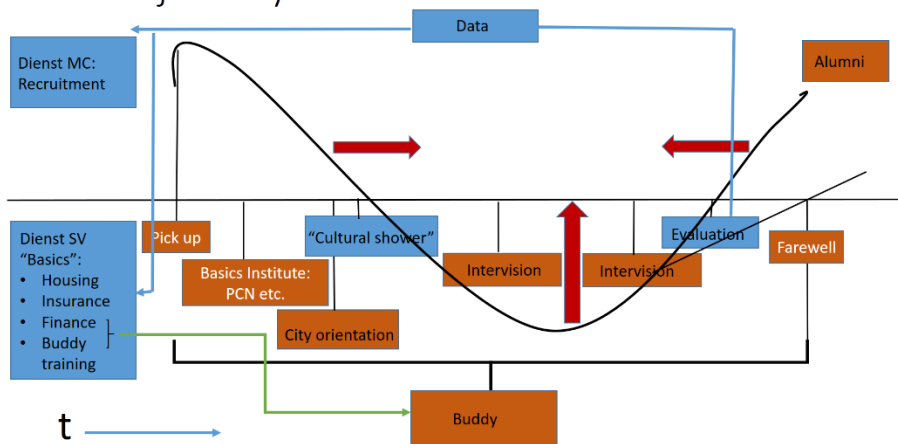


Figure 1, Schematic representation of Student Journey

The guidelines

Fontys wants international students to experience their study period at Fontys at least as positively as their studies in their home country. In order to achieve this, institutions must offer a basic level of guidance, starting at the moment of enrolment, during the process of integration into the new culture at

¹ fontys.edu/About-us/Who-we-are/Rules-regulations/Code-of-conduct

² These guidelines will be included in the *Student Well-Being Action Plan* part of the Study Success programme of the Student Well-Being working party (2018)

³ Nunez, C.; Nunez Mahdi, R.; Popma, L. *Interculturele communicatie; van ontkenning tot wederzijdse integratie* (2015)

the beginning of studies, as well as during studies. Fontys has drawn up four guidelines for this guidance.

Guideline 1: Effective communication and accessibility

Even before students come to the Netherlands, they have to arrange a lot of practical matters. Not only do they need a lot of information, they also have to arrange things and set things in motion. It is crucial that students only receive information on aspects that are important at the time; only send required information and preferably not until the student needs that information or has to take action. Keep the message as brief and clear as possible.

Also ensure that students have the right expectations when they come to the Netherlands by clearly indicating from the very first contact what they can expect of life in the Netherlands, the Dutch educational system and studying at Fontys.

Make sure that you can be contacted during the period that the students arrive in the Netherlands! Past experiences have shown that students particularly need guidance and support when they arrive in the Netherlands and immediately afterwards. In recent years, there have been situations that this was not organised properly, and students would come to the Customer Contact Centre during the summer holidays and could not be helped because no-one was available. This causes unnecessary stress and frustration among international students, and it is not the first impression Fontys wants to make.

Recommendations for implementation of this guideline:

- Inform students in advance at what times and via what means of communication the institution can be **contacted**, particularly during the summer holidays. Please note, for example, that you can be reached after sending an email.
- Draw up a **checklist** so that students know what has to be arranged where and when.
- Based on the checklist, provide the student with the information they need at the **right moment**, depending on their phase of the (enrolment) process. The Fontys websites, such as www.fontys.edu and FRESH (fontys.edu/freshatfontys/), which contains institution-specific information, can be convenient tools for this. Also refer students to general sites such as www.studyinholland.nl/ if they need the information that is available there (e.g. on scholarships).
- **Communicate clearly and concretely.** Be succinct, clear and transparent in the information you provide. Make sure there is a proper information structure. Use reminders, checklists, etc.

Guideline 2: Make students feel welcome and wanted when they arrive:

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression”. To reduce the effects of a culture shock, it is important to ensure that international students feel welcome as soon as they arrive. Pay extra attention to the students when they arrive, not only in a practical sense but also socially, and provide support wherever possible. In interviews with international students, they indicated that not only is it important to them that attention is paid to the practical sides of living and studying in the Netherlands / at Fontys, but also that social activities are organised at the start of their studies. This makes it easier for them to build up a new social network in the Netherlands and reduces the risk of culture shock effects, such as loneliness and homesickness.

Recommendations for implementation of this guideline:

- Organise an **informal welcoming event** for each location/city/institution. This could be a joint opening, a guided tour or informal group activities with a social character.
- Make sure that, upon arrival, there is **support for organising practical matters** such as enrolment, registration with the municipality, visa, bank, municipal health care service, accommodation, etc. This could be provided by an existing information desk or a specific person taking on this task.
- To help students integrate with Dutch students, a good option may be to have them **participate in the Purple introduction**. In that case, you must help students enrol, because all information is in Dutch. Where possible, bring international students in touch with Dutch students participating in Purple.

Guideline 3: Proper guidance is half the work

International students need someone to show them around the Dutch (study) landscape. Moreover, extra attention must be paid to the psychological and social risks of studying and living abroad. Studying in the Netherlands/at Fontys will be more of a culture shock for some students than for others, but every one of them will experience it to some degree. For this reason, it is important to pay specific attention to the culture shock and offer good guidance. If students know how to recognise the symptoms of culture shock and know in advance what they can expect, the chance of "getting through it" will be greater⁴. It is important that students know who they can turn to, so that they can contact the right person straight away. Proper guidance from the institution must be available at all times, offering students a contact for their questions and problems during their stay.

Recommendations for implementation of this guideline:

- Make sure that staff members who talk to the students have the right **intercultural skills** required to understand and properly supervise international students. Following intercultural awareness training could form a good basis for developing these skills among staff, but may also be useful for buddies.
- Make sure there are **permanent contacts**. This could be a student counsellor, a study career counsellor or an information desk where students can turn to with questions about their study as well as their private life. Preferably, a lecturer should be given the role of mentor, with whom international students are in regular contact. This helps build a relationship of trust and will have as a result that students will go to this person with their problems rather than to a general information point. A point of attention is the situation of students after 6 to 8 weeks; this is often the period during which the culture shock is at its highest point. It is recommended to organise a personal meeting with the mentor or supervisor during this period to assess how the student is doing.
- Introduce a **buddy system**. Interviews with current international students have shown that they really appreciated support from fellow-students at the start of their studies in the Netherlands. International students indicate that having an international student who is already studying at Fontys as their contact is very valuable, as it is easier to contact a fellow-student than a Fontys member of staff; moreover, the background and perceptions of such a fellow-student are usually similar to their own situation. A buddy system is, therefore, an effective solution, particularly for the initial reception and introduction to the Netherlands, Fontys and the study location. It is important to link this to credits or a different appropriate remuneration. This helps guarantee the quality of support from the buddy and increases the chances that students will apply as buddy. Introduce a buddy several weeks before the international student comes to the Netherlands. This way, they will already know someone when they arrive and know that there is someone they can turn to with their questions. The buddy's role may vary from picking up the student from the airport, accompanying them on their first visit to their student accommodation, to offering them a drink in town.
- At the start of the study, organise a **meeting about culture shock** to explain what it is, what the symptoms are and who students can contact if they recognise the symptoms in themselves or other students.

Guideline 4: Prevent loneliness

For international students, loneliness is one of the major stumbling blocks to success in their studies. Students regularly withdraw and feel lonely, as a result of which they feel homesick or even experience mental problems such as depression, causing study delays or, in extreme cases, termination of studies.⁵ This is not only undesirable for the student, it also harms the national and international reputation of Fontys. It is important, therefore, to ensure that students build up a social network, have enough distraction and build up a relationship with the Netherlands.

Recommendations for implementation of this guideline:

- At the start of the study programme (during the first six months) organise at least 2 **informal, social activities**. This could be a trip, but also an international quiz or international buffet where

⁴ Nunez, C.; Nunez Mahdi, R.; Popma, L. *Interculturele communicatie; van ontkenning tot wederzijdse integratie* (2015)

⁵ Hermans, J.; Pusch, M.D. *Culture matters, EAIE Occasional Paper* (2004)

every participant brings a dish from their own country. This type of activities helps prevent social isolation. Buddies can play an organising, accompanying or participating role in this.

- If students speak Dutch, even a little bit, they will feel at home more easily, get attached to the Netherlands more quickly, get in touch with other Dutch people more easily and will find a job in the Netherlands more easily after graduation. Nuffic has a website www.studyinholland.nl/practical-matters/learn-dutch/learn-dutch with apps and useful links to make learning Dutch easier and more attractive for international students. In addition, developing **Dutch language and culture training** is highly recommended.

With the above guidelines, Fontys seeks to lay the foundations for effective guidance and support of international students. They serve as the minimum service Fontys offers to new international students, for institutions that opt to actively recruit international students. These guidelines can also be used as a helping hand for institutions that receive international students occasionally or for the first time. The way in which institutions implement these guidelines depends on their specific situation. For instance, the size of the institution, the existing student population, the number and type of international students (bachelor, exchange, etc.), as well as the institution's internationalisation objectives.

Institutions that have questions about or need help implementing these guidelines can contact:
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