

International students at Fontys and their local employability

This handout contains the most important conclusions from the research within the INTERLOCALITY project on international students at Fontys. You can read about the bottlenecks they experience with regard to their orientation on the local labour market (internship, side jobs) and the success factors that contribute to finding a suitable job in the region after graduation. The perspectives of local employers, Fontys employees and other stakeholders are also discussed.

Although the shortage on the labour market is high, an important group with a lot of potential remains out of the picture: international students. They have difficulty finding a suitable job in the region after their studies and therefore often return to their home country or elsewhere. That is clearly a missed opportunity, according to the partners of the [INTERLOCALITY](#) consortium, and the question is how to retain this talented group for the region. Four universities of applied sciences ([UCN](#) in Denmark, [FH Münster](#) in Germany, [Arcada](#) in Finland and [Fontys](#) in the Netherlands) and an agency focused on international labour and student mobility ([SEND](#) from Italy) have joined forces for the INTERLOCALITY project to help their international engineering and business students in their orientation and landing on the regional labour market.

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The aim of the project is to develop various tools that could improve the preparation and entry of international students into the local labour market, including:

- an International Alumni Monitoring Tool (I AM Talent), which collects information about the career steps of international students and alumni, and their perception of the local labour market;
- activities to support international students in their first steps on the labour market during their studies (International Talent Journey);
- online training modules in the areas of guidance & counselling, intercultural sensitivity and employability to increase the knowledge of university employees, employers and regional actors.

For the development of these tools, interviews were held in the autumn of 2022 with 40 international students and alumni, 40 regional employers (SMEs), 15 policy officers from the universities of applied sciences involved, and 15 other actors involved in internationalisation on the local labour market. The purpose of these interviews was to map the needs and experiences of the various stakeholders with regard to the local employability of international students. This handout specifically discusses the conclusions relating to international students at Fontys in the Eindhoven-Venlo region.

FACTS AND FIGURES: international students in Dutch higher education

In the 2022/2023 academic year, 122,287 international diploma students studied at universities in the Netherlands. This was 15 percent of the total student population. Of all students at universities (WO), 25.1 percent were international, compared to 7.7 percent at universities of applied sciences (HBO).

At universities of applied sciences (HBO), there were approximately 11,173 new international registrations in 2022/2023, of which 7,851 students (70.3 percent) came from the EEA and 3,322 students (29.7 percent) from outside the EEA. In total, there were 2,281 more international students at universities of applied sciences compared to the 2021/2022 academic year. The total number of international students has therefore grown by 6.6 percent. (Source: 1 cijfer HO, [Nuffic](#) analysis)

One year after graduation, 46 percent of international graduates still live in the Netherlands. After five years, the stay rate has fallen to 24 percent. Of graduates from outside the EEA, 38 percent still live in the Netherlands five years after graduation, compared to only 19 percent of European students. The average stay rate five years after graduation is slightly higher among university graduates (24 percent) than among graduates from universities of applied sciences (22 percent). (Source: CBS, [Nuffic](#) analysis)

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

During their studies at Fontys, international students come into contact with the local labour market. This could be through a side job, for example, but also through an internship in the third year of study or the graduation project in the fourth year.

The interviews show that it is difficult for many international students to find an internship or side job. The search is mainly complicated by not mastering the Dutch language. Also, not all students have the skills to prepare a CV or motivation letter as expected, or to present themselves well during a job interview. Cultural differences play a role here. Their impression is that local employers are not always open to international students. Prejudices appear to be persistent. Students from outside the EEA face an additional barrier: they may only work with a work permit from the UWV (Dutch Employee Insurance Agency).

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"When you are looking for an internship or a job, you need to sell yourself well. And sometimes it takes a lot of interviews. I went to 10 interviews until I mastered the art of interviews."

- International student

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Most international students eventually find a side job or internship through a teacher or someone else close to them. They are also sometimes offered an internship via their side job or a side job via an internship. The network appears to have a major influence on finding work. And as an international student you simply have a smaller network than a Dutch student. International students would therefore like to receive more guidance in coming into contact with the professional field (networking). They also want more information about the rights and obligations of employers and employees in the Netherlands and support for interpreting Dutch contracts.

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"Most international students come with the expectation that they don't have to learn the local language to study or work, that English is good enough. But it is not, if they don't want to feel alienated."

- International student

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Once international students start working, they increase their self-confidence. They get to know the Dutch language and culture better and gain insight into the local labour market. This helps them with the orientation for the period after graduation. Yet some encounter problems. The informal way of communicating at work appears to take some getting used to. Many also mention not mastering Dutch as a reason for social exclusion at work. They do not always feel like they belong. Many international students therefore prefer a company with many other international employees.

LANDING ON THE LABOUR MARKET

The interviews show that most international students decide that they want to stay in the Netherlands after graduating because of a positive internship experience. Some people like the Dutch work culture or appreciate the employment conditions, others (including many engineering students) have already been offered a job by their internship company. A smaller group of students had already decided before coming to the Netherlands to study that they wanted to stay because of the favourable labour market conditions.

Some of Fontys' international students leave the Eindhoven or Venlo region for the Randstad, because they believe there are more opportunities for them there. They also appreciate the international community in the major cities in the west of the country. Yet the majority of international students leave the Netherlands within five years after graduating. Some are homesick for family and friends, or came to the Netherlands only for their studies. Others experience difficulty integrating into the labour market, have difficulty learning the Dutch language or cannot find adequate housing.

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"I think there's more of a deeper cultural issue, where employers are not necessarily open to outsiders. I've tried to find jobs with or without connections, I had some interviews, but still no luck in the hiring process."

- International student

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"Speaking as a non-European, there is a visa problem. It has to be applied for by the company. So there's paperwork for them, and extra costs, since it's time consuming. So the company has to be more committed if they want to hire us."

- International student

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For a better transition from study to work, international students and alumni indicate that employers should allow English at the workplace and be more open to people with a different cultural background, even if this means more paperwork in the HR process for people from outside the EER. They would like it if employers draw up the employment contract and other important documents in English, spend enough time on their onboarding, and fund Dutch language lessons. They also find it important that the organisational culture is inclusive, so that they feel at home among their colleagues. Training in the field of intercultural awareness or diversity and inclusion could be helpful for this. Students also like it when employers participate in Fontys career events or graduation projects, so that they can get to know each other in an accessible way.

EMPLOYERS

The interviews with local employers show that there are several reasons for hiring international students and alumni:

- Some employers are having difficulty finding local candidates with the specific knowledge and experience they need to grow their business due to the tight labour market. Recruiting international talents helps to fill these gaps. We see this especially in the tech sector.
- Other organisations want to expand their business activities and are therefore looking for international talent with knowledge of these new markets. In addition, they bring language skills that are important when expanding into foreign markets or serving a diverse customer base. We see this in both the tech sector and in the domain of international business.
- Recruiting international talents can also aim to increase the cultural diversity of an organisation. International employees bring new perspectives and ideas, which can lead to a more inclusive and innovative work environment.

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"We just want to work with the best people, and sometimes the best people have an international background."

- SME employer

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We found that many small SMEs find it difficult to recruit and select international students and graduates due to language concerns. They are afraid that international talents who do not speak Dutch will be left out in an organisation with mainly Dutch employees. In some cases, they also feel that the level of English of international students is not high enough when it is not their mother tongue. In addition, many employers are unsure about their own level of English or that of their team. Other reasons given for excluding international talent in the recruitment process are cultural differences, the onboarding that would take more time, the bureaucratic steps that need to be taken (which can also be time-consuming), and the team's negative prejudices towards foreigners.

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"In our company we have a certain communication style and way of working. I'm not saying it always comes down to cultural differences, but something we've noticed is that internationals might think we are rude, even though we don't mean to be rude."

- SME employer

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In addition, it appears that many SMEs from the Eindhoven and Venlo region find it difficult to gain exposure to international students and alumni. They think that they are less attractive because there are no other internationals working in the organisation, because as a small company they can offer few career opportunities, or because they are located outside the Randstad. If they do hire an international student or alumnus, this takes often place via Fontys (after an internship or recommendation from a teacher) or via their own network.

Employers would therefore like to receive help with various matters. For example, they see a need for employer branding to generate more interest in their company among international students and alumni. More intensive collaboration with Fontys for internships and graduation projects is sometimes suggested as a solution to this. It turns out that small SMEs often do not have an HR employee, and sometimes not even a standard HR process, and therefore need guidance with the paperwork the hiring of a candidate from outside the EER means. Some would also like English language support, when drawing up vacancy texts, employment contracts and other important documents. And finally, the interviews show that a number of employers want to learn how to deal with unconscious bias in recruitment, and cultural differences within the team. Still others do not mention this aspect, but appear to benefit from it to remove prejudices.

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"There is still work to do when it comes to diversity and inclusion. We have local people who've been working in our company for a very long time. Then driving change to include internationals can sometimes be a bit challenging."

- SME employer

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Recommendations

- Participate in Fontys activities to get in touch with international talent;
- Provide employment contracts and other important documents in English;
- Use the services of third parties for legal and regulatory assistance;
- Facilitate Dutch language courses for international talent within the work environment;
- Create support among other employees for the hiring of an international;
- Take an intercultural awareness course to increase knowledge and receive practical tips for dealing with intercultural diversity.

FONTYS AND OTHER ACTORS

The interviews with Fontys employees and other actors show that they have a good idea of the hindering factors that international students face. They note that, despite knowing all the obstacles, it is difficult to provide the right support, because many initiatives are aimed at Dutch students, general job seekers or expats. International students and alumni are often not a specific target group, which means that existing initiatives do not always meet their needs.

It also appears that the support offered by Fontys to international students to increase their employability during their studies is not always used.

Some students are not aware of the various services that Fontys offers, others are too busy with their studies and side jobs to engage in other activities in the context of their employability. And of course there is also a group of international students who do not see the need.

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"A lot of companies are internationally oriented, but they aren't ready to adapt to internationals. There's a difference between hiring or accommodating. Now it's more like: you can join us, as long as you play by our rules."

- Higher Education Institution employee

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"One step for non-EU talents is to make the visa process easier, especially when your status hasn't changed. And locals need to be more aware of the struggle that people experience, because if you were born and raised here, you do not realize that."

- Third-party organization employee

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In addition, it appears that employers do not tap into all the resources offered when recruiting and selecting internationals. Many SMEs are reluctant to participate in career events or partnerships with Fontys because of the time investment. The services that third parties such as Brainport Development and Holland Expat Center South offer to employers regarding language and regulatory matters are also not always deployed. Probably not everyone is aware that these initiatives exist. And there is a group of employers who want to put as little effort as possible in the recruitment of new staff, which means that internationals are 'automatically' left out of the picture. So there is still much work to be done!

This handout was created by coordinating researcher [Loes van Beuningen](#) and researcher [Dick Siesling](#).

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