

International classroom at Eindhoven University of Technology

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Abstract—Engineering is rapidly becoming more international and multidisciplinary. Eindhoven University of Technology (‘the university’) has defined its policy on internationalization and educational innovation. The paper describes a first study into international classroom at TU/e that aims at the description of its current status and additional measures.

Keywords— *International Classroom, inclusion*

I. INTRODUCTION

The work of engineers is increasingly international and rapidly changing. Future engineers will work in multidisciplinary and international teams on open multidisciplinary engineering problems [1]. In line with this, the university has developed its vision on educational innovation [2]. It emphasizes ‘Challenge Based Learning’. This involves group work in which students collaborate in multidisciplinary teams to learn by solving meaningful engineering problems. The university is forcefully moving forward and aims to have 30% of its curriculum consisting of such challenge based tasks [2]. Reaching this goal is a challenge in itself. Teachers may have limited background in creating such learning tasks and guiding students working on such tasks. In addition, the use of multidisciplinary tasks urges teachers to adequately use and merge the styles and working methods from various engineering disciplines.

Simultaneously, student intake is rapidly becoming more diverse due to demographic developments and international influx. Particularly so due to the university’s location in the heart of the so-called ‘Brainport’ region. The Brainport organization includes city councils as well as the main companies in the region and educational intuitions [3]. It has developed an active policy in the field of internationalization and inclusion in education, and the university plays a vital role in it [4].

TU/e’s educational policy has made the university attractive to a wider variety of students. Important aspects of the increasing student diversity concern: cultural background, gender, individual learning goals, individual ambitions and a variety of STEM-identities. Like all education in a diverse society, TU/e is taking up challenges with respect to student diversity [5]. In close connection to matters of internationalization.

Currently, research groups at TU/e have staff members from various countries and roughly 30% of the staff is foreign. This number is likely to grow, due to policy but also since over 40% of the tenured staff is international. Just below 60% of the PhD students is international.

Concerning bachelor and master students two groups of international students are distinguished: exchange students (not included in this study) and ‘international students’ – staying to study at Eindhoven for a longer period of time and

preparing for a degree at TU/e. Currently 9% of the bachelor students and 21% of the master students at TU/e are ‘international students’ [6, p. 8]. The group of international students comprises students from European (EER) countries (roughly 2/3) and non-EER students (roughly 1/3).

A report on stay rates by Nuffic [7] states that in the Netherlands almost 25% of the graduates from HE still stay in the Netherlands for at least 5 years and that this number is growing. Graduates from Dutch technical universities have an average stay rate of 41%. The university has the highest stay rate of 52%, - a figure that well aligns with the Brainport regional policy.

Recently, TU/e has formulated its policy on the university’s international classroom [6]. The ambition for internationalization is that over 20% of the incoming bachelor students and over 35% of the incoming master students comes from outside the Netherlands. In addition, the aim is that more than 90% of all TU/e students will have a substantial international experience during their studies. The policy defines ‘International Classroom’ as: *a learning space of a group of students in which*

- *different nationalities with different cultures are represented,*
- *the common instruction language is English, which is not the first language of most students present,*
- *students and staff engage in and appreciate diverse and multicultural teams, and*
- *the diverse learning environment is (created) such that it enables students to gain international and multicultural experience and enhances the education quality.*

II. GENERAL AIM OF THE PROJECT

Within this context TU/e has started a project aiming at strengthening International classroom, in particular concerning the type of Challenge Based Education promoted in its educational policy. The project’s aim is to provide concrete support and guidelines to teachers and staff. Thus facilitating the successful implementation of the international classroom at the university. More specifically: a) providing an overview of ‘the state of affairs’, b) raising awareness of international and cultural diversity, and c) empowering teachers and staff to be effective in teaching and preparing students for future international careers. For example through providing resources and training)

III. PROJECT IN THIS PAPER

This paper is concerned with the first (‘a’) of the above aims: providing an overview of ‘the state of affairs’ concerning the international classroom at TU/e, and may contribute to raising awareness of international and cultural diversity throughout the university (‘b’). The third aim (‘c’) requires an in-depth study into group work in international

teams, and is not discussed here. The study described in this paper however aims at paving the way for a second study by identifying subjects and courses suitable for such an in-depth study.

IV. THEORY

There is abundant international literature on internationalization and multicultural diversity in higher education [8]. Apart from overarching issues such as 'policy and regulation', 'community building', and 'language issues', intercultural communication and collaboration has been identified as the key area of interest. This not only concerns the students, but also the effectiveness with which teachers deal with their internationally composed group of students.

Teachers may miss 'cultural sensitivity' and/or may feel underprepared with respect to guiding and coaching a strongly diversified student groups. Elements of teacher 'intercultural readiness' may comprise: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication skills, intercultural relationship building skills, conflict management skills, leadership, and tolerance of ambiguity [9].

Dalglish [10] distinguishes four main strategies that teachers employ in international classrooms: (1) *Exclusion*: international students are excluded or cultural differences are ignored; (2) *Assimilation*: international students are expected to behave as domestic students do, without being offered special assistance, (3) *Integration*: International students' need for assistance (e.g., due to (supposedly) not possessing all required skills) is recognized and responded to; (4) *Mutual adaptation*: The reality and desirability of multiculturalism is recognized and, as such, international students are considered to be a resource in the learning process.

The occurrence of these strategies is expected to be directly related to the fraction of students present in the classroom that are international (see, e.g. research on gender diversity in STEM programs by Dasgupta et al. [11]). *Exclusion* and *Assimilation* are more likely to occur in groups with a low fraction of non-domestic students and/or situations in which students themselves form small 'student teams' to perform e.g. Challenge Based learning task or projects [12]. However, particularly the strategies 1 and 2 threaten the effectiveness of learning and may lead to exclusion/lockout, whereas student diversity should be considered an asset, thus creating an advantage for *all* students. Hence, it is important to examine how teachers can effectively handle diversity in situations with a variety of ratios of Dutch and non-Dutch students, and how the formation of student teams is performed.

In addition, teachers – and students – have expectations about behavior and performance and about the added value or problems of a diverse group composition - the so-called 'diversity beliefs' [13]. It is important to see the opportunities that (international) diversity offers [12], and to distance oneself from a 'deficit mode' [14] which is mainly thought in terms of 'shortages' among the 'others'. Here Teacher cultural background may play a role e.g. as described by Hofstede [15]. For the inventory study it is important to map the 'diversity beliefs' of both students and teachers at TU/e.

Generally, meaningful well-aligned education is believed to facilitate success in an international or multicultural classrooms as well as in less diverse situations. Challenge-based engineering projects bear these characteristics. Allport's

Intergroup Contact Theory [16] points to four conditions key to successful interaction: a) *equality* of status amongst all participants, b) sustained engagement in *cooperative* tasks, c) working towards a *common goal*, d) *support* of relevant authorities [8, pp. 122–123]. Culturally Responsive Teaching theory [17], adds four further conditions: a) establish inclusion, b) develop a suitable attitude, c) enhance meaning, and d) engender competence. For each of these a short description is given [8, p. 145]. Next to that, assessment plays an important role in education. This goes for the actual assessment as well as the clarity on the actual assessment on start and the (culturally inspired) expectations concerning it [8]. Choices can be made on the 'reward structure' that is used for assigning grades particularly in groupwork: all group members receive the same grade vs differentiation in grades (Homan et al., [18]). Hence it is important that the inventory addresses these educational issues and their interactions with student diversity.

V. SPECIFIC AIMS OF THE INVENTORY

All this calls for active educational leadership that stimulates and supports teachers to succeed in reaching the internationalization aims set. The inventory addresses four points in particular:

- the fraction of non-Dutch students,
- the way student teams are formed and the resulting student team composition,
- students' and teachers' diversity beliefs',
- the teachers actions with respect to education in general and diversity within it in particular,
- Issues currently the interaction and building of an community including both Dutch and non-Dutch students and staff,
- for all these, the currently occurring issues,
- the identification of subjects/courses apt for study in the second phase of the project.

VI. METHODS

Making an inventory of the international classroom at TU/e entails a quantitative overview of the actual degree of internationalization per subject (or course), of the issues apparently occurring, and of the way in which these are currently dealt with. Moreover, it entails the qualitative description of the formation, collaboration and guidance of student groups.

This study is of explorative of nature and employs a mixed method approach combining [19]: analysis of administrative data, document analysis and interviews with various actors and a short teacher questionnaire.

A. Analysis of administrative data

From the university's subject catalogue and Learning Management System (LMS), data were extracted to identify subjects that: a) were populated with a considerable fraction of international students, and b) involved group work of a kind akin to Challenge Based Learning.

B. Document analysis

Four panel meetings with non-international and international students respectively, and non-international and international staff members respectively were administered. Questions included the definition, the perceived added value,

the perceived difficulties, and suggested possible measures to improve International Classroom.

C. Interviews with various actors within university staff

These interviews included:

- Educational directors
- Educational counsellor (academic advisors)
- Teachers

All interviews gradually moved towards issues indicated as commonly sensitive from literature [8], [10], [17] such as differences concerning: use of diaries and appointments, direct- and indirect ways of addressing issues, grading, asking questions, mastery of English, attitudes and behavior in groups, valuing volunteering, the moment of social-events. Also, all interviews were concluded with a question on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current international classroom, and measures or improvements.

Interviews with the educational directors followed an open format aiming at collecting information on policy, rules, potentially interesting subjects and/or best (teacher) practices.

Interviews with educational counsellors and teachers were semi-open. The interview started with a very open question on the meaning of the internationalized student population on the counselors work. These interviews addressed three themes: *Education*: Starting with an open question on the situation of internationals (and non-internationals) in various subjects and workgroups and moving towards group work, labs and internship in particular. *Formal issues*: Starting with an open question concerning procedures, guidelines, community, and policies and their interaction with the international (and non-international) students. Then moving forward to issues particularly focused at: specific regulations (e.g. study-progress demands), examinations/grading, and academic counseling (e.g. organization, commonly occurring issues). *International community*: Again starting with an open question yielding the opportunity to bring forth the aspects of international community apparently most salient. Further questions address: satisfaction of both international and non-international students with the international community, integration, inclusion, language issues, student association, representation in boards.

Teacher interviews followed a format akin to that of educational counsellors, but focused on classroom issues instead of on regulations. Examples are: student group formation, student group collaboration, student attitude, student group guidance, grading, and issues occurring in classroom. These interviews were supported by a small questionnaire previously completed.

VII. DATA COLLECTION

Data have been collected in the first semester of the academic year 2019/2020. In total ten educational directors, nine academic advisors and eight teachers have been interviewed. The current analysis is only preliminary. Data will be fully collected and analyzed in the first months of 2020.

VIII. RESULTS

A. Panel meetings

Panel meetings comprised 23 volunteering students and staff members from four separate sub panels (Dutch students,

non-Dutch students, Dutch staff, non-Dutch staff). The sub panels had approximate equal sizes. These had previously completed a short questionnaire.

It was found that 73% of the participants from all sub-groups fully agreed with the statement that “international classroom is an enrichment opportunity for all students and staff”, while 23% partially agreed. The added value of the international classroom was perceived firstly in a broadening of the perspective on the subject studied and the awareness of multiple - intercultural – views on the subject and in general (52% of the responses). Secondly it was perceived in a better preparation for the (international) labor market (39% of the responses). The participants indicate that a successful international classroom at TU/e should involve at least 25-30% non-Dutch students, and possibly more.

Next to this positive attitude, it was found that 68% of the participants (from all subgroups) agreed that ‘intercultural awareness and intercultural communication skills should be improved at TU/e’. Another 23% indicate to agree partially with this statement. Concerning the perceived difficulties concerning the installation of a successful international classroom, ‘cultural barriers’ (in neutral terms) were the most frequently mentioned (39%), followed by ‘cultural and integration issues’ (formulated in terms like ‘bias’, ‘overcome’, ‘cordially supported’) (25%). Teachers tended to prefer ‘neutral wordings’ (47% over 18%), while students use ‘neutral’ and ‘less-neutral’ wordings equally often. Apart from the above, language issues are mentioned in 22% of the statements.

In addition, a majority indicated that the key issue in establishing a successful international classroom is that “students and staff engage in and appreciate diverse and multicultural teams” (57%). In line with this, ‘forced mixing of international and non-international students’ to form multicultural student groups was the measure most frequently mentioned as advisable for improvement. Next to that, two other measures were frequently indicated as advisable: convince all members of the university community of the benefits of internationalization and improving the ‘international mindset’ of all staff and student. And finally, improve the preparation of staff member to effectively deal with multicultural groups and train them to use the international classroom as a tool for educational enrichment.

The interviews with the educational directors indicated huge differences between the various departments concerning both the degree of internationalization, and the approach taken. On one extreme, a department has been internationalized years ago and currently have developed an active policy in welcoming international students. On the other end, one of the departments has only a few international students and mainly have exchange students.

In addition, document analysis revealed that in the Bachelor the departments (c.q. studies) in the field of Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Design and the Built Environment were internationalized the strongest (15%). In the master, internationalization is stronger and takes values up to 60%. The master studies internationalized strongest are in particular specialized innovative fields mainly in the domain of Computer Science, Electrical Engineering and sustainable Energy. Here, a the fraction of non-EER students is high in particular.

B. Educational directors

All 7 educational directors (EDs) are also academic teachers, since educational director is a temporary part-time job in the Netherlands. The educational directors are all aware of the universities policy on internationalization. Educational directors of programs that have a longer experience with larger groups of internationals (e.g. automotive) have more awareness of the issues involved. None of the EDs mentions any program specific policy concerning international classroom. Most EDs express their views by describing 'issues concerning international students' and differences in terms of culture and attitude of international students as compared to Dutch students. It is recognized that international students usually get better results than Dutch students. They also indicate that teachers usually let students form their own study groups.

C. Academic advisors

In interpreting the interviews with the 9 academic advisors it must be taken into account that the very role of 'academic advisor' implies that issues and 'problems' may be overemphasized, also those related to the international classroom. With the exception of academic advisors specializing in international students, the academic advisors report that international student seem reluctant to call on their services. This may cause the interviews to be biased towards a 'Dutch' view.

Dutch student calling on the academic advisor generally want to discuss study progress and the so called BSA (= the minimum number of credits in the first year they need in order to be allowed to continue their studies). In this, they do not refer to any aspect of internationalization in relation to the issues they seek to discuss with the academic advisor. However, students indicate that collaborating in an international setting requires some additional effort. International students calling on the academic advisor report 'work pressure' issues which stem from the combination of slow study progress and the limited duration of their visa.

Academic advisors state that in they have the impression that 'Dutch students prefer to work with Dutch students and international students tend to work with international students'. Here language as well as 'fear for the unknown' may play a role. The academic advisors confirm that the formation of student-groups is usually left-over to the students themselves, and advocate students to be intentionally mixed when student-groups are formed.

On the level of student group work, the academic advisors indicate that some students report complexities concerning collaborating in student groups. Reasons vary from 'differences in style/attitude' and unfamiliarity with each other's customs, skills and background, to confusion about de planning due to (previously) unexpected holiday's.

The academic advisors do not report conflicts concerning grading specifically involving international students. But some 'intercultural misunderstandings' may occur such as students seeking to negotiate their grades (which conflicts with Dutch expectations and habits). According to the academic advisors, the exam committees (which according to Dutch law are to assure the quality of the examinations) are aware of the specific circumstances of international students and act accordingly in individual cases. No specific guidelines are reported as to safeguard that grading is impartial with respect to international and/or cultural perspectives.

On the more general 'community level', issues were reported such as 'different customs concerning the use of alcohol', 'having or not having student meetings outside the weekend', 'Dutch students (or staff) talking Dutch amongst each other in informal settings'. Some international students also indicate to the advisors that they sometimes feel 'alone'. Dutch and international students becoming friends, is perceived to be rare. International students have an (English spoken) student association of their own while the other associations often use Dutch for (informal) issues.

Apart from these, international students have to deal with various practical issues such as housing problems, financial issues and visa. Dutch students and probably staff seem largely unaware of these issues which play an important role for international students. They generally perceive that internationals are super motivated and recognize that they often outperform Dutch students, but do not realize why. Dutch staff and students also seem largely unaware of how easy it is to exclude international students.

All-in-all, it can be summarized that though academic advisors are reluctant to say that international students experience difficulties concerning integration, this seems to be implied by most of their answers. In this, their perception is that integration is more easy for EU students than for non-EU students.

Academic advisors also plea for more sensitivity and awareness of these issues, and state that more attention is needed for introducing international students to the Netherlands, Dutch manners, and the university.

D. Teacher interviews

Interviews were carried out with 22 teachers of selected subjects that involved student groupwork as well as a substantial number of international students. The teachers confirm that for roughly half of the teaching subjects for which this is applicable, student-groups are formed by the students themselves. In about 40% of the cases, the teacher forms the groups and does so mainly on the basis of the students (assumed) competencies, gender, grades and/or interest. Roughly 30% of the teachers states that 'mixing Dutch and international students' plays 'a role' in forming student groups.

Concerning their attitude (DalGLISH) none of the teachers reports cases of international students being excluded. Roughly half of the teachers indicate that international students are expected to behave as Dutch students and that they do not offer specific assistance for that. Another group of roughly one quarter shares this view but recognizes that international students need assistance for this and offer such help. Finally, another quarter recognized that international students are an important resource to the benefit of the whole community. Most lecturers do not deploy activities aiming at harvesting on the international heterogeneity of the group/groups.

When asked about the positive effects (or chances) of an international classroom, the vast majority of the teachers names 'enrichment of education for everybody through multiple culturally diverse perspectives'. Occasionally a raise of student motivation and an improved mastery of the English language are mentioned. A very small minority of the teachers say they cannot name an advantage.

When asked about the negative effect (or risks) of an international classroom two main issues are mentioned. First, the level of English of some international students that is perceived as below standard. Secondly but mentioned equally often, the time needed for introducing international students to the way of working at this university is mentioned as a factor that increases workload, and may lead to a misbalance in time spent on Dutch and international students.

IX. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The university has just started to systematically take up the challenges posed by the introduction of an international classroom. A positive mindset toward an international classroom is found amongst almost all staff and students. At the same time, awareness, attitude, knowledge and intercultural competencies appear limited.

Between the various courses and programs at the university vast differences exist. With respect to the fraction of international students and the composition of the international classroom, but as well as with respect to the awareness and proficiency of staff concerning the operation of an international classroom.

On the average, intercultural awareness amongst staff and students seems limited. Dutch students and staff seem unaware of various of the issues and experiences that play an crucial role for international students. Academic advisors and respondents that volunteered for the panel discussions may have a stronger awareness. This seems also the case for teachers involved in courses and programs that have been populated with larger groups of international students for some time already.

Concerning the attitude of the teachers it is found that on the average this can be typified best as an assimilation approach leaning towards an integration approach – in terms of Dalglish [10]. For example, half of the teachers indicated that they primarily focus on presumed weaknesses of international students and do not offer specific help (assimilation). Another quarter had the same view but did offer specific help (integrations). Even despite the omnipresent recognition that international students generally have better grades than Dutch students.

Teachers' individual positions however seem to vary. For example, yet another quarter of the teachers unambiguously named international students as an important resource contributing to the benefit of the whole community. In the panels, various such advantages were described, in particular the 'broadening of perspectives and knowledge' for all students. But the panels also revealed that 'a cordial support of everybody' is needed for a successful international classroom. This could indicate that in practice some teachers take an attitude on the low side of the assimilation level. Overall, it is therefore concluded that the attitude of teachers varies from somewhat under 'assimilation' to 'mutual adjustment' with a clear center of gravity somewhere above the assimilation level.

The actual level of integration achieved clearly leaves room for improvement. In student groups, as well as on a more general level. The Dutch and international student community seem to co-exist as two relatively independent worlds. No exclusion is reported but positive steps can be (and are) taken e.g. on the level of student welcoming and introduction, international community building activities.

There are also indications that some international students experience technical (e.g. visa) and intercultural difficulties in integrating. This is an issue that needs to be taken seriously and it indeed is addressed in the university's internationalization policy [6].

1) Actions and plans

The current 'assimilation attitude' is a risky one. It involves the risk of unintentionally being a recipe for loading the 'burden' of establishing the international classroom on the shoulders of the international students. International students would be perceived as e.g. 'costing time' or 'raising work-pressure'. Such a view does not include the overall gain accomplished by a well installed international classroom. It is a false perception. Hence it is important that teachers and students are (and feel) supported in their efforts to realize an optimal international classroom. But also that the benefits are made visible as clearly as possible.

The university is already planning and taking action as to support the realization of the desired growth of the fraction of international students while improving the international classroom. Examples are providing courses for teachers that feel underprepared to be effective in realizing an international classroom. This study suggests some supplementary measures.

Firstly, respondents share the perception that there should be much more attention to and more time should be available for introducing international students to the TU/e. This introduction should include: becoming acquainted with the Dutch culture, with the working and communication style that is customary, and what the teachers do and do not expect of them. It should also provide them with resources from which they can build their new social life here, and leads on where to go to in case of issues. In this, care should be taken to surpass the level of 'assimilation', for example in that demands and expectations are negotiated within the international community so that expectations and demands do not just bluntly represent a one-sided 'Dutch perspective'.

An additional measure could be assigning an 'buddy' to international students that can support the integration process after the first introductory weeks. This could also help building connections between the Dutch and international student communities.

Secondly, language issues are observed. These may partly be 'technical'. But more care needs to be taken in using / not using Dutch within the university – also for informal issues. The use of English as official language at TU/e per January 2020 is a first step to achieve this.

Thirdly, an effort seems needed to make sure that all students and staff understand and recognize the value of the international classroom. This goes for Dutch students and staff in particular. On that basis students and particularly staff should be equipped to create an inclusive situation. Raising this awareness and 'intercultural competence' also goes for lecturers and assistants who play a vital role in education e.g. in their role of supervisor of student groups working on problems and challenges.

The university is clearly challenged to motivate and equip the staff and students to actively build and sustain an inclusive international community. But this also works the other way around; as larger numbers of international students enter the university, international collaborations become more

common and cannot be avoided. Engaging in such collaborations will contribute to awareness, knowledge and intercultural competence.

A very important measure would be the broadly supported idea of deliberately mixing Dutch and international students when forming student groups. Mixed groups with a balanced composition seem best.

The current study was limited and descriptive of nature. Nevertheless, in particular due to the use of interviews and the combinations of various sources of information (triangulation), we think that it validly reveals the main features of the current status of international classroom at the university. A clear flaw in the design is the absence of direct input from a larger number of international students. Student interviews are currently being prepared that will be the basis of a questionnaire. In the next phase of the project will also study in detail the collaboration internationally mixed student groups.

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