

## Dutch Academia: how to kill work ethic?

*One of the aims of vocational education is to foster the student's work ethic: the dedication or devotion to one's occupational tasks. The student is to develop a proper Arbeitsethos, as they call it in German. But Dutch universities rather tend to kill their students' work ethic. That is the proposition I will elaborate here.<sup>1</sup>*

*In the first section I will discuss the way Dutch universities treat part-time students, who want to combine study with a paid job. In the remaining four sections I will discuss the way the study tasks are being organized. Work ethic is about doing a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. Students hope to be assigned feasible study tasks. They hope to get a fair study load, given the time they are able to invest into their study. And they hope their invested study time will yield optimum learning gains. On that basis a proper work ethic can be maintained and promoted. I shall explore whether Dutch universities create that basis, or at least try to do so.*

### Preliminary remarks on my terminology

I should begin, however, with a preliminary remark on my subject. Dutch higher education system is divided into two parts: on the one hand university education offered by research universities and on the other hand vocational education offered by universities of applied sciences. The latter are called 'hogescholen' (in German: Fach-hochschulen). In the last decade a third part is coming up: the undergraduate liberal arts colleges set up by research universities, next to their scientific and vocational courses such as medicine, law, sociology, physics or engineering. When I speak about Dutch Academia, I am focusing on the research-oriented university departments in which students are introduced into one scientific discipline or one strictly delineated set of disciplines.

Furthermore another part of my terminology must be clarified. A *course* or *track* or *curriculum* is meant to be a whole programme, covering one or more semesters. It consists of many separate *modules*. Each module is concluded with an exam of its own (called a *tentamen*). The quality of the student's performance is graded on a ten-point scale. If the grade is satisfactory (grade 6 or higher) the student is acquitted with a certain amount of ECTS credit-points corresponding to the estimated work load of the module.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Part-time students betray their academic vocation

In the world of adults one will gain respect by earning one's living through a paid job. This respect nourishes a healthy work ethic. Moreover adults are warned against getting into debts: borrow brings sorrow. But in Dutch Academia this work ethic is turned upside down. A few departments in the Netherlands offer part-time curricula, but generally studying is considered to be a full-time job. Dutch students learn that study is their vocation and that paid work is an obnoxious distraction. They learn that their work ethic, I mean any dedication to a part-time job, is a betrayal of their academic commitments. Part-time work is condemned as nothing but idleness.

In Dutch Academia there is no room for part-time students. Freshmen have to gain a sizable amount of credit-points and if they don't succeed, they will be expelled from the course. Having a part-time job is not accepted as a valid excuse. And also after their freshman year Dutch part-time students can be confronted with sanctions against study delays.

Dutch universities are killing the notion that paid work is a respectable part of their students' study career. Students are expected to be financially supported by their parents. But how about students whose parents are not able or willing to cover their living and study expenses? Dutch government expects them to take a study loan which they will have to pay back with interest afterwards.<sup>3</sup> This over-optimistic, risk-taking 'live now pay later' attitude is being drummed into their heads right from the age of eighteen.

So, in Dutch Academia any work ethic of her students is frowned upon. As far as university depart-

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<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the conference *Work Ethics* of the Student Association Psychology (section Organizational and Social Psychology) of Groningen University, October 10th, 2012. The author Wes Holleman (1941), a sociologist, has worked as a consultant and researcher on university teaching and learning. His publications include: *Loopbaan-begeleiding: hulpverlening aan studenten bij de planning en sturing van hun studie- en beroepsloopbaan* (1975), *Over studielast en studeerbaarheid* (diss. Utrecht 1993), *Onderwijsethiek, een literatuurstudie over professioneel handelen van docenten in het hoger onderwijs* (2006). The latter book (and this paper) can be downloaded from <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl>.

<sup>2</sup> One credit-point  $\approx$  28 hours work for a standard student. A one-year programme (42 weeks) comprises modules to the amount of 60 ECTS credit-points.

<sup>3</sup> At an interest rate not known at the time the loan was taken!

ments try to develop and promote work ethic, they focus on their students' study ethic. They try to stamp a strong study ethic into their minds and to fight their lack of study motivation. Hence I have to explore in the rest of my paper whether Dutch Academia promotes a strong study ethic.

## **2. Academic excellence: conflicting obligations**

Students are expected to view their academic study as a full-time vocation and as the one and only focus of their work ethic. Dutch Academia considers them to be novice members of the Community of Scholars. Finally some of them will take the vow: they end up into a life-long career of Research and scholarly work. But in the meantime all students are expected to devote their efforts to their scholarly training. If they are highly successful in this training, they will be elected to stay forever, whereas most students will stay only for a few years and then find a job in Society.

When entering their course of study (say Psychology) freshmen are offered a hybrid track. It combines the Society-bound track (for students who aspire to become a therapist, for example) with the Research-bound track (for students who want to excel and become a scholarly worker). This two-in-one track gives rise to two conflicting definitions of study ethic within Dutch Academia. *On the one hand* each student is expected to keep up with the programme and gain the credit-points that are minimally required to reach the undergraduate and graduate diplomes. They have to earn satisfactory grades (6 on a 10-point scale or C on a ABCD scale). For Society-bound students marginal C-grades will do.<sup>4</sup> *On the other hand* Research-bound students have to earn higher grades in order to be eligible to the Research-bound graduate courses and to the PhD track. Within their modules they are encouraged to do additional study, to produce brilliant papers and theses. Also they are encouraged to take additional modules, as well as study tracks abroad, in order to show their academic excellence. Moreover, they may be invited to paid internships (as a student-assistant or Akademie-assistant).

Research-bound students are being confronted with a double obligation, stemming from these two conflicting definitions of study ethic. On the one hand they try to keep up with the programme (as are their Society-bound peers), but on the other hand they have to show devotion to the high values of the Community of Scholars, no matter how much study delay that may bring about. They are being thrown back and forth within this double commitment: either earning the praise of their scholarly teachers or avoiding the risk of being crushed by strict study regulations and merciless administrators. This never-ending dilemma can damage or even kill the study ethic of Research-bound students. If it is made impossible to meet both definitions of study ethic, they are prone to get demoralized.<sup>5</sup>

## **3. The propaedeutic exam year: on probation**

Let us return to the rank-and-file freshmen. Having passed the State-controlled final highschool exam, they are admitted automatically to university. They can enter any course of study, provided that they have passed the proper highschool modules. So, the university departments do not have admission exams of their own, but this does not mean that entering students are considered to be fit for the course of study they have chosen. In the freshman year they are on probation and at the end of this year they can be expelled. Many students will meet that fate.

Let us compare this with the course of action employers would take towards their new employees. They would try to identify high risk employees as soon as possible, preferably before hiring them, but in any case within the first couple of months. They would carry out diagnostic procedures in order to assess their competencies, assign them work tasks which match their competencies, and support them to improve their competencies and to acquire lacking competencies. In that manner they strengthen the work ethic of all newcomers and allow them to make a good start and reach a well-grounded decision, shared by employer and employee, on whether to stay or leave.

Not so in Dutch Academia. No diagnostic tests are offered, neither before nor at the start of the freshman year. No remedial modules are offered to students who have gaps in their entering repertoire and no time is programmed to make up these gaps. They are thrown into the deep of a fixed, exacting programme. And if they don't succeed, they will be expelled, considered to be unfit for this course of study. When entering university they are warned: take a good look at your neighbours at your left and right side and be sure that one of you three will fail this year. In fact they should be warned that at least two of these three

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<sup>4</sup> Yet their study load is relatively high as they have to meet the C-level requirements set for Research-bound students. Moreover these requirements must exceed by far the standards of the down-to-earth 'hogescholen'.

<sup>5</sup> Departments should solve this problem by disentangling their hybrid course offerings. They should offer a honours track to Research-bound students, that comes in stead of the regular programme but has to be completed in the same programmed time. Its modules may have heavier workloads and more challenging tasks, but honours students will be referred to the regular programme if they cannot keep up the pace.

students will either drop out or exceed the nominal duration of their three-year undergraduate course. It is quite normal that 40% of the participants of a module will fail at its final exam and have to go for a resit.

Freshmen are learning that faculty is not there to help them proceed towards academic success, but to examine their academic fitness and to test their survival skills. In highschool they have developed a study ethic, based on shared endeavour and mutual trust between teacher and learner. That study ethic is being killed in the student's first year at university.

#### **4. Failure = Laziness. Hence it must be punished.**

The harsh treatment of freshmen in Dutch Academia is not only dictated by the assumption that many freshmen are unfit for the course of study they have chosen. Another assumption is that many students have a bad study ethic. In order to promote a healthy study ethic, only one remedy tends to be applied, namely holding out and imposing harsh sanctions upon students who fail their modules or get delayed. Lazy students must be punished. In the freshman year expulsion is the ultimate sanction for students supposed to be lazy, but other sanctions are applied as well, throughout the study career.

The Dutch government takes the lead by charging high tuition fees (1700 euros for each year spent in higher education).<sup>6</sup> But universities and departments apply additional sanctions to fight a bad study ethic and root out laziness. In their punitive approach they may apply the following sanctions on study delay:

- (Herkansen:) they reduce the number of resits per module or per course year, or permit resits only to students who performed just a tiny bit below the mark;
- (Doubleren:) they oblige students to repeat a module if not all requirements have been met, including time-consuming requirements which were completed successfully;
- (Geldigheidsduur:) they invalidate credit-points which already have been granted, if the student has proceeded too slowly through the programme as a whole;
- (Omzwaaiers:) they refuse to acknowledge credit-points which transfer students have earned in their former programme, and they don't allow them any headstart in their new freshman programme.

All these sanctions have in common that they are designed to promote a strong study ethic. The sanctions are meant to prevent students to be lazy. But if students do not manage to avoid such sanctions, their study ethic is damaged profoundly. For these sanctions, if imposed actually, will cause additional study delays. Students are confronted with forced underutilization of their available time and forced repeating of tasks that already have been completed successfully.

#### **5. The industrial assembly line: cost-effectiveness at the expense of individual differences**

A bestseller in Dutch management books was *Intensieve Menshouderij* (2005). In many modern companies and organisations people are treated as if they were chickens in the intensive livestock breeding industry. This industrial way of production is chosen as the company tries to minimize cost and maximize profit, not taking into account the interests of the chickens which are being processed.

Over the last decade, this industrial thinking model has gained ground in Dutch universities. In former ages, when I was a student, it was contended in Dutch Academia that students should not be pampered. They should be left to themselves in order to develop independent and self-supporting study habits. The departments did not care how long that would take. Nowadays this structural abandonment is considered not to be acceptable anymore. Departments are held responsible to lead student cohorts to graduation within a reasonable lapse of time. In order to control the cost of teaching and assessment they have set up a rigid assembly line in which students are to be processed.

The American psychologist John B. Carroll conducted military training research during the second World War and subsequently designed a Model of School Learning (1963). He stated that two main factors are involved in study success: time-on-task needed and time-on-task spent. The industrial assembly line of modern Dutch Academia rests on the unproven assumption that variations in time-needed are small and hence negligible, after freshmen have passed their probation year. So the assembly line has one speed for all. If students fail a module, or have to skip a module, it is their own fault: apparently they have been lazy. Teachers don't find any sound reasons to accommodate for students who fall behind in their modules or in the programme. Students who get delayed, will incur more delays due to the rigidity of the programme:

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<sup>6</sup> A bill imposing an additional penalty on students whose study delay amounts to more than one year (3000 euros pro annum) was passed but will not be put into effect. On the other hand a bill has come into force which prohibits provisional admission to the one-year graduate programme if the student has not quite completed the three-year undergraduate programme. This may cause long waits. See: <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/onderwijs/harde-knip-tussen-bachelor-en-master>.

- they incur waiting times for resits (if these are offered at all);
- resits are scheduled during the teaching semester, which makes it difficult to combine them with study obligations of ongoing modules;
- modules are scheduled once a year, so if you skip one (or if you have to repeat one) you have to wait until the next year;
- the programme is compressed into ten months each year, and in the summer period generally no modules nor resits are on offer.

Thereby, slower students get no opportunity to spread their study load smoothly over the year. They incur periods of heavy overload and periods of forced underload and slack. Moreover, as is known in Labour psychology, periods of heavy overload are likely to take their toll with recovery time, if not illness or burn-out. Universities have reframed their definitions of academic fitness, academic readiness and academic diligence. Students are considered to be unfit or lazy if they do not fit into her assembly line. Dutch Academia kills the work ethic of students who do not fit into her preset breeding factory.

## **6. Conclusion: Dutch Academia is killing her students' work and study ethic**

**6.1** *Part-time students* who want to combine study with paid work, are frowned upon. Their work ethic is considered to be a betrayal of their real vocation, which is full-time studying. No accommodation is made to their occupational obligations. If their parents are not able or willing to pay they are expected to take a study loan from the State. Any work ethic they might have, is to be replaced by study ethic. But Dutch Academia is killing study ethic as well:

**6.2** The study ethic of *talented, Research-bound students* is undermined by two conflicting forces. On the one hand they are strongly encouraged to earn high grades and to take additional study tasks, additional modules, time-consuming tracks abroad and paid internships within Academia. On the other hand they are pressed to keep up with the regular programme and to avoid study delays. By these conflicting expectations their study ethic risks to be spoiled.

**6.3** The study ethic of *freshmen* is undermined by a hostile teaching and testing culture. In the first year they are on probation, as there is no entrance examination. There are neither diagnostic entrance tests nor remedial classes for students who turn out to have deficiencies in their entering repertoire. The freshman year is a ten-months examination period through which it is tested whether the student is fit for the chosen course of study. They find no trustworthy teachers and coaches helping them, but distrusting examiners opposing them. This abandonment undermines their study ethic.

**6.4** Dutch Academia tends to foster a punitive approach against *delayed students*. All students are suspected of being lazy. After having past the probation period, they are supposed to be able to keep up with the programme. If they don't, it is assumed to be caused by laziness. Since the university wants to promote study ethic and fight study delays, harsh sanctions are held out and imposed: as a penalty for their laziness they are condemned to idleness and waits and to redo tasks already completed. Being hit by such sanctions, their study ethic is killed.

**6.5** Finally, *slower students* are abandoned without pity. The research university tries to save on teaching and assessment cost. Therefore, all students are pressed into a rigid assembly line. Departments feel no need to accommodate their programmes to individual differences in study speed, as the slower students are assumed to be either unfit or lazy. This rigidity of the study programmes causes slower students to get demoralized and lose their study ethic.

**Wes Holleman, October 9th, 2012** <sup>7</sup>

### ***Post script I: on the absence of real coaches***

*Faculty in Dutch Academia has a threefold job: teaching, student assessment and scholarly research. Student assessment is about grading the student's performance (how good?) and about pass/fail decisions (good enough for granting credit-points?). In many modules student assessment is interwoven with teaching: student performance is assessed continuously (not only at formal exams but also during the module, as the student is studying). So, the role of the teacher (instructor, trainer, helper/coach) is very ambiguous, as it risks to be contaminated by the role of examiner (judge, reviewer, evaluator). The distinction between helping (formative) evaluation and high-stake (summative) evaluation is blurred. Teachers do not permit themselves to be real coaches, as they are afraid to raise false expectations or to compromise their role of examiner. Even when students have managed to earn a satisfactory Pass at the*

<sup>7</sup> URL: <http://www.onderwijsethiek.nl/onderwijs/dutch-academia-how-to-kill-work-ethic>

*exam, teachers do not celebrate their students' success but fret at their low aspiration level (the so-called 'zesjescultuur'). Due to the lack of real coaching and personal encouragement, the student's study ethic is being killed.<sup>8</sup>*

***Post script II: on academic writing***

*Work ethic can be defined as the dedication or devotion to **purposeful** work, including the goals of the tasks at hand. As to academic writing tasks, i.e. the papers and theses students have to write, Dutch university teachers permit only one way of writing: according to the scholarly rules and according to the scholarly style. They do not explain (nor illustrate) that this genre may not be appropriate in normal occupational settings. When students get their writing assignments, it is not even specified for what purpose they are supposed to compose and send their message (communication goal), nor to whom they are supposed to address it (target person or target group). By this ambiguous lack of a purposeful context their work ethic is being endangered.*

***Post script III: how NOT to promote work ethic?***

*The present paper was read to an audience of students in the field of Organizational Psychology. For them, the paper may shed some light on problems about work ethic of university graduates entering the labour market. But it might be useful in another way as well. Could it be used as a lesson how NOT to promote the work ethic of employees? Five Don'ts are brought to the fore:*

- 1. Deny employees' requests for part-time contracts*
- 2. Challenge high potentials by overloading them*
- 3. Screen applicants by a harsh and hostile probation year*
- 4. Punish employees who work at a speed slower than required  
(especially: punish them by keeping them from work)*
- 5. Deny milder deadlines to employees working at a slower speed*

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<sup>8</sup> *Bijbaan goed voor budget en voor moreel*, journalist Mirjam Schöttelndreier reported in *De Volkskrant* (18/9/2012). If students are in need of a listening ear and a compliment now and then, they rather will find it in a paid part-time job.