

# Binding International Talent to the Netherlands



What Makes Foreign Students and Knowledge Workers Want to Stay in the Netherlands?

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# 0 Executive Summary

With regard to the increasing global competition for highly-skilled labour, the group of mobile international students is becoming more and more prominent in the considerations of national policy-makers. One concrete idea is to develop policies in order to bind international students and foreign knowledge workers and make them valuable contributors to the country, economically but also in terms of social and cultural aspects. The Dutch government has put this issue on the agenda and emphasized their interest in binding international talent to the Netherlands. Therefore, it is crucial to learn about the factors, which are decisive in staying and going and which are particularly appealing or unappealing about the Netherlands.

In order to contribute to this process, a study was done among international students, alumni, and staff at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. This study's findings have been validated and enriched by the results of a broader survey which has been conducted among the talented international students participating in the Nuffic NL4Talents conference of 4 February 2013 in The Hague.

This study suggests that two principal reasons are relevant in residence decisions: career perspective and personal factors, such as having a Dutch partner or circle of friends. Additionally, a number of further factors seems to influence whether internationals want to stay in the Netherlands. All these factors are classified in four groups: those related to the Netherlands in general, to the region/city of residence, personal aspects and aspects related to the university.

With regard to the Netherlands, appealing factors appear to be the standard of living, the socio-political environment in the Netherlands and the supposedly welcoming Dutch culture. There are, however, people - in particular those who cannot fully enjoy all rights of the EU citizenship - who feel underprivileged in terms of administrative procedures and in their everyday life in the Netherlands.

When it comes to the regional aspects in The Hague, appealing factors are apparently the clean and safe environment to live as well as the availability of several offers for leisure time, including an attractive cultural agenda. Here, the housing situation – more precisely the cost and quality of accommodation – appears as a rather unappealing aspect.

In terms of personal considerations, the family-friendly environment in the Netherlands has been rated as particularly appealing. Also having a Dutch partner or Dutch friends may encourage international students to stay and work in the Netherlands. The findings suggest, however, that international students are more embedded in an international circle of friends than linked with the locals. Only few respondents felt being actively excluded from Dutch circles, but a majority agrees that it is difficult to establish bonds with the local population. At the same time, it has been raised that international students voluntarily live in their expat bubble.

Lastly, the university experience can contribute to retaining international students. Here, appealing factors were the international study environment which makes the foreign student feel at home, as well as the level and focus of education at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. By contrast, critical views have been raised in relation to a suggested lack of career counselling and support in learning the Dutch language at university. Based on these findings, the report concludes with some recommendations which might serve as a springboard to develop strategies to bind international talent.

As the discussion of findings shows, the insights of this study can be validated by insights of a related study that has recently been conducted by Agentschap NL and the advice of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands. Based on the findings, the report concludes with a number of recommendations outlining how national, regional, local authorities as well as universities can help to retain more international talent in the Netherlands.

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# 1 Introduction

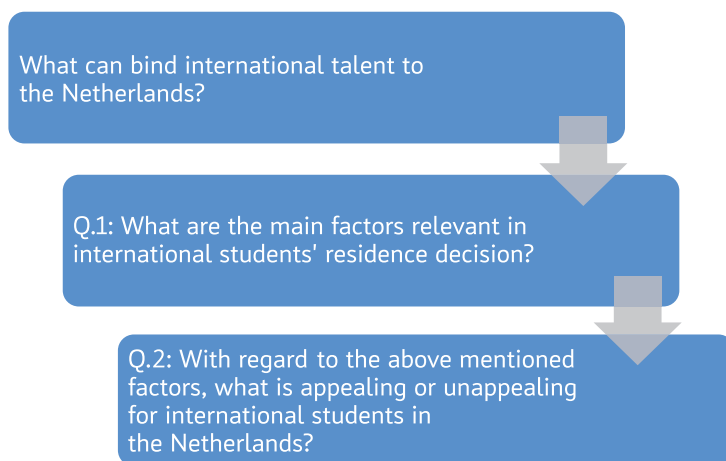
The relatively recent increase in the mobility of human capital raises new opportunities and challenges for the stakeholders involved (McKinsey Global Institute, 2012, p. 13). On the one hand, many highly skilled workers today are able to enjoy a wider choice in terms of their residence country, and on the other hand, national labour markets encounter a competitive environment in which the actors aim to recruit the highly skilled globally (Doomerink, Koslowski & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 3). More precisely, the globalized world is one in which an increasing number of well-educated professionals is more mobile in terms of searching for a place of residence and at the same time national economies have to deal with a new, competitive situation in trying to increase their attractiveness in the global job market for highly skilled workers. The latter aspect is notably true for the so-called advanced countries. As studies indicate (*cf.* McKinsey Global Institute, 2012), both the demographics as well as the inherent structure of those national economies will lead to an increasing demand for highly skilled labour in the future, and thus to what has been referred to as the *battle for brains*.

In view of such prognoses, decision-makers are more and more acknowledging the necessity of designing policies tailored to improving their countries' competitive position on the global job market for highly-skilled knowledge workers (Venhorst, Dijk & Wissen, 2010, p. 521). According to the OECD report *Education at a Glance 2011*, international students are perceived as a promising target group in countries' strategies to recruit the highly-skilled. The aim of such strategies is to establish a particular area as an *opportunity-rich region* (Venhorst, Dijk & Wissen, 2010) for the highly-skilled internationals. The government of the Netherlands has put the topic on the agenda as illustrated by the initiative of the then Dutch State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Mr. Halbe Zijlstra, who, in reference to the results of a recent CPB report (Centraal Planbureau CPB, 2012) and in line with the above mentioned competition for the highly skilled, issued a letter to the parliament outlining the positive effects of international knowledge workers who stay and work in the Netherlands and in particular the need to



investigate exactly those factors which bind foreigners to the Netherlands and determine the international students' decisions to stay or go (The Netherlands' Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, 2012). Also Minister Jet Bussemaker emphasized the need to study how the Netherlands may succeed in binding more international students after their graduation (Transfer Magazine, 2013).

This study's objective is to contribute to the discussion on binding international students and knowledge workers to the Netherlands. The main aim is to uncover the factors which determine whether international students stay and work in the Netherlands after receiving their degree. Additionally, the study looks at respondents' concrete *evaluations* regarding the decisive factors. In other words, the two key questions at the core of this research are:



**Figure 1**

Hence, the results of our study may serve as a starting point and reference for further considerations on how to develop policies which strengthen international students' attachment to the Netherlands and consequently improve the country's competitive position on the global market for highly-skilled professionals. Moreover, this investigation may provide valuable insights for institutions of higher education, which aim to improve their standing within the global knowledge economy.

## 2 Background

This Chapter will look at two phenomena, which contribute to the increasing political interest in the factors that can bind international students, namely at the global competition for highly-skilled workers and the increase in international student mobility. In addition to this broader context, the specific situation of the Netherlands in this battle for brains will be sketched.

### 2.1 A Global Competition for Highly-Skilled Labour

Even though both immigration in general and attracting foreign labour are by no means new phenomena, their focus has significantly changed. In fact, most Western European countries, including the Netherlands, have become immigration countries during the last decades (Bijwaard, 2010, p. 1216), but the perception of migration into those countries gradually shifted since the beginning of the new millennium (Doomerink, Koslowksi & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 4). Whereas, in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the recruited immigrants were low-skilled workers, nowadays the highly skilled are the ones much sought-after. This shift in the recruitment strategies of advanced countries is mainly rooted in the predicted domestic shortage of highly-skilled labour in the future.

Focusing on the development in OECD member states, Chaloff & Lemaître (2009) purport that “many countries expect growing shortages of highly-skilled labour in the coming two decades” (p. 4). This view is supported by an empirical model that is offered in a recent study, prognosticating a potential shortage of 38 million to 40 million college-educated workers in 2020 worldwide (McKinsey Global Institute, 2012). Reasons for this expected shortage are diverse: ranging from the increasing demand for well-educated workers in emerging economies such as China, India, and Brazil to domestic factors and demographic dynamics in the more advanced countries (Doomerink, Koslowksi & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 4).

Sustaining economic growth in advanced countries will mainly depend on knowledge-intensive sectors and consequently require highly-skilled talent; it is projected that employers in advanced economies will likely demand 16 million to 18 million more workers with tertiary education by 2020 than their labour markets are likely to have (McKinsey Global Institute, 2012). Since necessary long-term strategies, such as attainment in tertiary education and increasing women's participation on the job market, will not compensate for the immediate lack of highly-skilled labour, there is clearly an economic rationale for policy-makers in advanced countries to recognize the global competitive dynamic and improve their regions ability to attract and retain the well-educated internationals.

In addition to the above noted economic reasoning, also demographic and social aspects indicate the positive effects of attracting foreign highly-skilled labour: The ageing of societies and, at the same time, the shrinking of the active work force in the advanced countries - the estimated decline of work force in Western and Central Europe without international migration amounts to 10 percent in 2025 and 28 percent in 2050 (Niessen, 2012, p. 34) - will put pressure on domestic social frameworks such as pension schemes. Here, the recruitment of highly-skilled people can be one factor to compensate for the imbalanced ratio between pensioners and active workers. Moreover, positive side-effects of highly-skilled immigration cover social aspects, such as civic participation, as well as cultural benefits.

Policy-makers are certainly aware of the importance of attracting highly-skilled labour. This is evident in the design of new national immigration policies across Europe during the last decade (for a summary on implemented national immigration policies in Europe see Doomerink, Koslowksi & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 4). Responding to the new competitive dynamics in the global, labour market, European policy-makers focused on facilitating the administrative aspects in the recruitment of international professionals – as yet with limited success (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009, p. 4). Analyzing the successful strategies of the “long-standing players like Australia, Canada, and the United States” (Doomerink, Koslowksi & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 6) can provide valuable insights. However, it has been argued that a country's success in attracting highly-skilled migrants depends not only on

implementing the best technical or administrative approach, but also on the combination of social, economic and political circumstances such as economic trends, educational systems, recognition of qualifications and other social factors (Doomerink, Koslowski & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, this study focuses on the diverse factors which are crucial for retaining international students.

Another lesson that can be learned from the experiences in traditional immigration countries is that “the highly skilled often initially migrate as students rather than workers” (Doomerink, Koslowski & Thränhardt, 2009, p. 16). This is supported by Chaloff & Lemaître (2009) in their OECD working paper, detecting that “international student policy has now become a tool in the international competition for high-level skills” (2009, p. 24). In that sense, the group of international students and the phenomenon of international student mobility in general become an integral part of the countries’ attempts to deal with potential shortages of highly-skilled labour.



## 2.2 International Student Mobility

Recognizing the potential of international students in relation to the expected shortages in the labour market is a relatively new development. Traditionally, most policies and studies on incentives and effects of hosting international students have emphasized other aspects. Here, the concept of *knowledge economy* plays an important part in the policy-makers' considerations.

*Knowledge economy* refers to the idea that "an effective higher education system is integral to the success of a country's economy" (Fernandes, 2006, p. 133). Next to educating their own population, some countries perceive higher education as a commodity in the international education market. Positive effects of this internationalized *knowledge economy* for the particular host countries are "potential advancement of their economic, political and diplomatic interests" as well as cultural benefits (Fernandes, 2006, p. 133). In addition to those societal effects, recruiting international students has also become a strategic aspect to ensure the financial health of higher education institutions themselves (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 5).

In the light of these diverse possible contributions of international students, their backgrounds, motives, and expectations are rather understudied in academic literature - in fact, international students have often been spuriously interpreted as just another subcategory of international migrants (King & Ruiz-Gelizes, 2003, p. 230; Findlay, 2011, p. 163). To avoid a conceptual stretch, studies should carefully distinguish international students from international migrants or other related but distinct groups. Often, and this research will follow this conceptualization, international students are defined as precisely those "who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin" (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 19). Hence, the group of international students must also be distinguished from the broader community of foreign students. The latter is commonly determined on the basis of its members' country of citizenship, whereas the former term implies that students have crossed borders with the intention to study (OECD, 2011, p. 78).

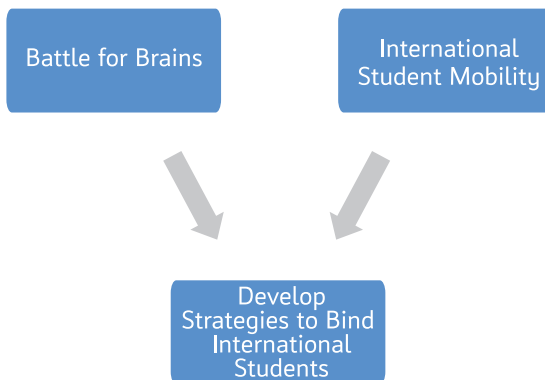


So, international students have become an important factor in the strategic considerations of policy-makers (Findlay, 2011, p. 162; King and Ruiz-Gelizes, 2003, p. 229). Indeed, the increasing strategic importance of international students is also reflected in the subject's recognition in academic and institutional publications on trends concerning international student migration. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), the number of globally mobile students is constantly increasing (up to 3.4 million students in 2009; in relation to 2.1 million in 2002; cf. Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 6). Also the report *Education at a Glance 2011* published by the OECD states that the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide increased by 77 percent since the beginning of the new millennium (OECD, 2011, p. 319) - a trend in the mobility of students that will be sustained in the next years, as Choudaha & Chang (2012, p. 17) point out. Concerning the target group of international students in advanced countries, the OECD highlights that the percentage of international students in tertiary enrolment has also increased since 2004 in all 16 OECD countries with available data (OECD, 2011, p. 321). In terms of the student migration flows, the advanced OECD countries are the major destinations hosting an overwhelming majority of international students and Asian students form the largest group of international students with 51 percent of the total in OECD countries (OECD, 2011, p. 327).



## 2.3 The Situation in the Netherlands

Both global phenomena have been discussed in the context of political debates in the Netherlands in recent years. The increasing competition for highly-skilled labour and the resulting need to improve the Netherlands' competitive position in the global *battle for brains* has been recognized and first initiatives have been announced (Transfer Magazine, 2013). Such initiatives are contrasted by critical views highlighting the risk of *brain drain*, meaning that initiatives to improve recruitment mechanisms might lead to the effect that masses of highly-skilled people enter the Dutch labour market at the cost of developing countries. Addressing the latter objection, governance codes for socially responsible practices in hiring highly-skilled internationals have been implemented (Oers & Minderhoud, 2012, p. 50). Hence, the recruitment of international talent for the Dutch labour market is evidently on the political agenda.



**Figure 2**

Also in terms of the potential of international student mobility, the Netherlands is not an exception from the global trend; in fact, the number of international students in the Netherlands is constantly increasing. Whereas, in 2006, a number of 35.092 international students were registered in the Netherlands, Dutch institutions of higher education hosted more than 58.000 international students in 2012 (CPB report 2012, p. 9). This means that international students currently make up for almost 10 percent of the total number of students in the

Netherlands; the vast majority of these internationals are EU-citizens, but at least 27 percent are nationals of non-EU countries). With the increasing number of international students, the Netherlands' situation is in line with the general trend within the European Union.

With regards to the fact that both phenomena, viz. the increasing competition for highly-skilled knowledge workers as well as the increasing international student mobility, appear also in the context of the Netherlands, it is not surprising that their cross-effects have been debated in Dutch politics. In 2012, the Dutch Cabinet published figures on the issue, outlining that retaining 20 percent of the international students would bring an additional 740 million Euro for the treasury (The Netherlands' Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, 2012b). In fact, the CPB report highlights that the economic benefit, next to socio-cultural positive effects, of an international student for the host country largely depends on the fact whether he or she stays and works in the host country after graduation or not (CPB 2012, p. 20). Accordingly, Dutch politicians seem to recognize, student mobility as a form of global talent recruitment embedded within the globalization of higher education (Findlay, 2011, p. 165). Dutch politicians emphasized the need to investigate the factors which determine whether international students stay in the Netherlands or not (The Netherlands' Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, 2012a) requesting advice from the SER, The Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (The Netherlands' Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, 2012b).

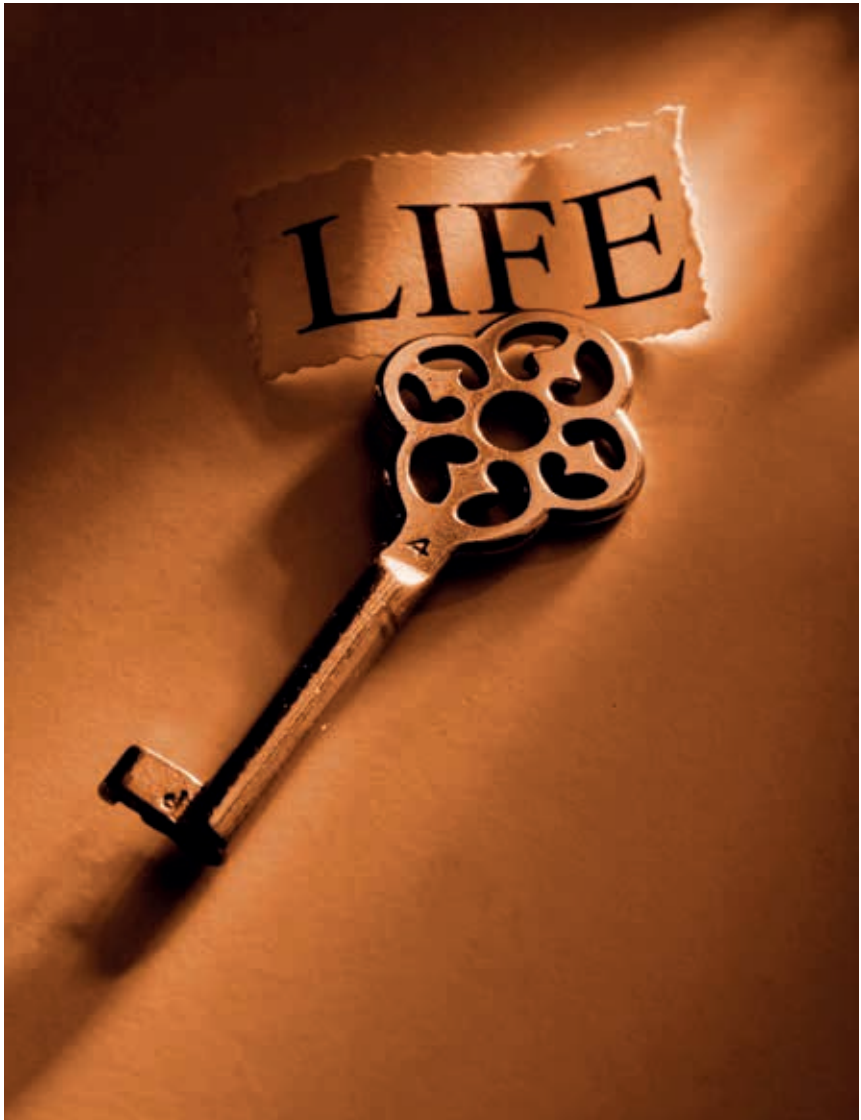


## 2.4 Factors in Internationals' Residence Decision

With regard to the emerging interest of policy-makers in recruiting international talent, the factors which can bind internationals seem to be rather understudied. Previous studies have mainly focused on the motives that influence migration decisions in general. Even though, as Lowell (2009) emphasizes, there is little agreement among scholars on the factors which impact migration, some aspect reoccur in the academic literature (p. 53). Most theories focus on economics and familial factors in explaining migration, but also labour market factors, demographics, friendships, and educational or training incentives can play an important role (Lowell, 2009, p. 53; p. 93). In their study highly-skilled migrants in the Netherlands, also Berkhout, Smid and Volkerink (2010) conclude that the decision-making processes of migrants include many factors, among which financial and career motives are often the most prominent ones (p. ix). But also an appealing living environment and aspects such as the labour market are considered to be important by the study (Berkhout, Smid & Volkerink, 2010, p. ix). Interestingly, also the highly skilled migrants' opinion about the Netherlands on some of these factors has been investigated with overall positive scores (Berkhout, Smid & Volkerink, 2010, p. ix).

A study that does not focus on highly skilled migrants in general, but on international students in particular has been conducted by the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration. The investigation of international student's staying intentions in five selected EU countries shows suggests that employment opportunities and the objective to gain international work experience are the two most prominent reasons for aiming to stay on after graduation (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 38). Other factors, such as the quality and way of life, the connection to the respective place and friends, family and personal relationships, are seen as influential to a smaller extent (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 39). Additionally, this study's results indicate that international students' propensity to stay is influenced by the study experience and therefore by actors in the higher education sector (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 51). Finally, simultaneously to the

study at hand, data has been collected by the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands about what binds international students to the Netherlands (cf. SER, 2013). This data might allow for interesting comparisons of results and will be examined in the discussion.





# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Mixed Method Approach

Two methods have been chosen to collect relevant data required to address the research questions, namely semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. This mixed method approach served two purposes. Firstly, it enabled us to use one research strategy in order to help employing a second method (Hammersley; in Bryman, 1996, p. 607). More precisely, the first round of interviews was conducted in order to expand and refine the online survey. The second purpose of combining two methods was to allow for gaining deeper insights and also for cross-checking and therefore validating the results of each distinct method (Seale, 2010, p. 297; Gilbert, 2009, p. 127). Here, this research's design, mixing semi-structured interviews and a survey, has been proven to be valuable in previous studies (Bryman, 1996, p. 623).

## 3.2 Target Group

The target group of this research consists of three subgroups.

- The first subgroup is composed of international students at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. The number of contacts in the subgroup-dataset is  $N_{\text{international students}} = 219$ , students, who will normally graduate in 2013 and therefore be confronted with a residence decision soon.
- International alumni from The Hague University of Applied Sciences constitute the second subgroup as former international students, who already made their residence decision after graduating. Due to the limited availability of respective data, the study focused on those alumni who recently graduated, more precisely within the last three years ( $N_{\text{international alumni}} = 268$ ).
- Finally, the third subgroup consists of international staff members who are, either in teaching or in administration, active at The Hague University of Applied Sciences ( $N_{\text{international staff}} = 59$ ). Members of the latter subgroup can contribute to the study with their insights in the factors that influence internationals' perception of their stay in the Netherlands. These three subgroups form an overall target group of  $N_{\text{target group}} = 546$  persons.



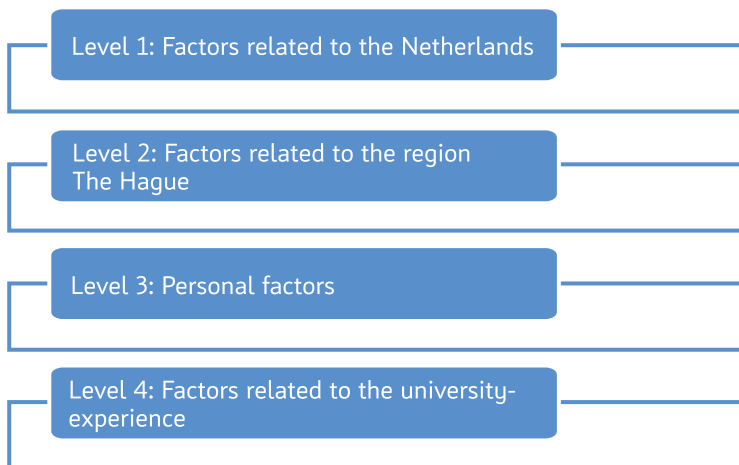
### 3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

For the interview, interviewees have been chosen randomly out of the three subgroups. This sampling approach corresponds with commonly recommended probability sampling (Bryman, 2008, p. 171). Concerning the data collection, the first round of interviews was conducted on the basis of a preliminarily prepared interview guide (Bryman, 2008, p. 443). Based on the insights gained in first round of interviews, the interview guide (*cf.* Appendix I), as well as the questionnaire design (*cf.* Appendix II) were revised. Interviews ( $n_{\text{interviews}} = 27$ ) have been conducted with an equal number of members of each of the three sub-groups until theoretical saturation was achieved (Bryman, 1996, p. 482). The invitation to participate in the online questionnaire was sent to all contacts within the target group ( $N_{\text{target group}} = 546$ ). The survey was open for some eight weeks and three reminders were sent in order to increase the number of respondents before the survey was closed in February 2013 with a total number of responses of  $n_{\text{survey}} = 77$ .

The absolute number of survey respondents from the each of the subgroups was almost equal ( $n_{\text{survey international students}} = 26$ ,  $n_{\text{survey international alumni}} = 27$ ,  $n_{\text{survey international staff}} = 24$ ). In relation to the overall target group, the survey response rate is  $r_{\text{survey}} = 14$  percent.

### 3.4 Survey Design

The survey design aims to allow participants to fully express their opinions and attitudes on the subject. Therefore, interview guide and questionnaire design arranged for open questions, through which participants can share their opinions freely, as well as closed questions. Moreover, in order to find out about participants' attitudes, the survey design contains statements on which respondents could agree or disagree using a Likert scale (Bryman, 2008, p. 213). Here, respondents are asked to place their response on a five-point scale (Gilbert, 2009, p. 213). To structure their thoughts, the interview guide as well as the questionnaire design scheduled four distinct levels on which factors in internationals' residence decision may be discussed (*cf.* Appendix I and Appendix II).



**Figure 3**

The first level consists of **factors related to the Netherlands** in general, such as career perspectives, the Dutch culture, and the socio-political environment. **Regional factors**, for example the quality and costs of accommodation or the safety and cleanliness of the neighbourhood constitute the second level. Level three covers the **personal factors** which have been mentioned by the respondents, such as considerations concerning the respective partner, the family or the circle of friends. Finally, all factors which refer to the internationals' **university experience** are categorized in the fourth level.

### 3.5 Considerations on Research Ethics

The ethical guidelines for academic research have been considered carefully. For example, all participants were asked for their informed consent after the data collection (Seale, 2010, p. 185). More precisely, all interviewees were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and asked to sign a consent form, declaring that insights and quotes could be used for publication. Also in terms of the distribution of the online survey, research ethics have been respected faithfully. Moreover, with regards to an ethical approach to research, it is crucial to mention possible limitations to the data before presenting the findings: As already noted, the data collection was only

implemented among students, alumni, and staff members affiliated to one particular institution: The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Thus there may be a difference between this study's sample and the overall population of international talent in the Netherlands and therefore the results should be evaluated and generalized with caution to this source of potential bias (Bryman, 2009, p. 168). A further limitation to the study derives from the rather low response rate of  $r_{\text{survey}} = 14$  percent on the online questionnaire (Bryman, 2008, p. 219); it was the intention to compensate this possible deficit by the additional insights gained from the interviews. In addition, the research group has used the opportunity to conduct a second round of the same questionnaire among a broader, nation-wide group of international students in order to validate and enrich the results (*cf.* 4.3).



## 4 Findings

This Chapter will discuss the main findings of the study. Recall the scope and the two key questions of this research:



**Figure 4**

The study's insights in relation to key question Q.1 will be presented in Section 4.1, starting with the interview findings which will then be enhanced by the questionnaire results. The second main question at the core of this study Q.2 will be approached in Section 4.2. Here, it will be presented which of the factors are perceived as appealing or unappealing by the target group. Finally, the results of the additional questionnaire that has been conducted to validate and enrich the findings will be presented in Section 4.3.

## 4.1 What Are Factors in the Residence Decisions?

### 4.1.1 Interview findings

When asked about possible factors which determine whether one might stay in the Netherlands after graduating, most interviewees referred to **job-related aspects**. As one interviewee stated: “If I would be offered a really nice job in Rome, there would be nothing that keeps me here [...] but if I would find a challenging job here [...] there is nothing that would drive me away either” (Interviewee V.). The importance of proper career perspectives was also emphasized by another interviewee who stated he came to the Netherlands because of “the international environment and the concentration of diverse job opportunities [...]” (Interviewee W.). Almost all interviewees mentioned job perspectives as a decisive factor in their residence considerations, or at least affirmed their importance when being asked. The opportunity to get an appropriate job seems to rank very highly on the priority list of internationals when deciding where to reside.

Even though the initial answers of most interviewees included the availability of proper job opportunities as a crucial aspect, the considerations of internationals do not seem to be one-dimensional. A further factor, which was prominent in the interviews addressed personal circumstances. For example, an international staff member explained: “I met my partner in Holland, otherwise I would have gone back to Germany” (Interviewee C.). Thus, it appears that personal considerations often include the current situation of a partner, or the more generally family-related aspects. As interviewee M. emphasized: “I was going to work abroad, but then reality happened and I had a child”. For one interviewee, having a small child played an important role in the residence decision for example in choosing for a safe environment (Interviewee W.). Hence, the interviews uncovered that **personal factors** related to the partner or wider family constitute a further key element in international graduates’ decisions on whether to stay in the Netherlands or not.

Again, job opportunities and partner/family-related factors were most prominent in the interviewees’ comments on aspects influencing their residence decisions. But also statements which relate to the **experience at the higher education institution** or in their everyday life were quite common.

Here, interviewees emphasized the cultural diversity in society in general (Interviewee T.) as well as within University (Interviewee R.). Naturally, experiences during the study may also influence the residence decision in a negative way, for example for R. who perceived the “people unnecessarily cold, and the authorities to be prejudiced in respect to foreigners from Bulgaria and Romania” (Interviewee R.). Hence, in addition to future-oriented factors about job opportunities and personal relations, concrete **experience in the socio-cultural environment** or in the educational institution has been indicated as very important in the interviews.

In addition to the introductory open questions on the most important factors for deciding whether to stay in the Netherlands or not, the semi-structured interview arranged for probing and confronting the interviewees with further possible factors in order to gain deeper insight into their considerations. Interestingly, both probing and the confrontation with concrete possible factors showed that the international students’ considerations can be very diverse. Rather specific aspects that have been raised and re-affirmed by other interviewees consist of factors such as the **administrative procedures**, the specific characteristics of the **Dutch education system** or the non-hierarchical relations in the Dutch **working environment**.

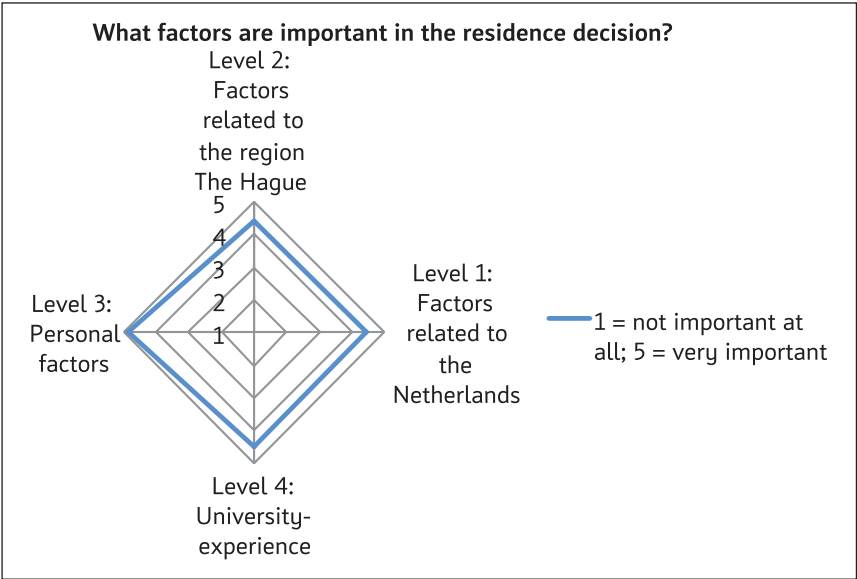
Consequently, the interview results suggest that one may perceive the considerations as a composition of a multitude of factors. As it seems, internationals evaluate a rather complex set of factors in their residence decision after graduation. Only few factors were rated as being not important by the target group, whereas respondents stated or affirmed a number of diverse aspects as influential for their considerations.

#### 4.1.2 Questionnaire findings

What the analysis of the questionnaire data uncovers is that there are in general no statistically significant differences between the three subgroups in their answers. As the international students, international alumni and the international staff at The Hague University of Applied Sciences did generally speaking not show remarkable differences in their answers, the three subgroups’ results will be presented as one homogeneous set in the following. Instances in which the three subgroups differ will be explicitly mentioned.



In order to validate and enrich the interview findings, the questionnaire respondents were asked to rate the importance of each of the four levels of factors in their residence decision. The questionnaire results support the view that one can speak of a multitude of relevant factors allocated to all four pre-defined levels. More precisely, the average rating for each level was rather high, as the following figure illustrates.

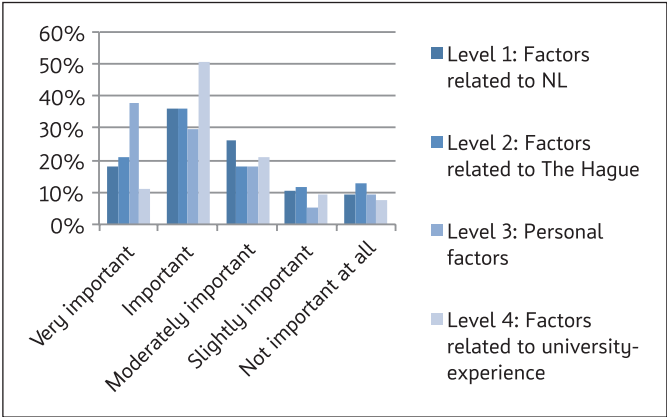


**Figure 5**

Personal factors have been rated as being of outstanding importance with a mean score of 3.82 and the regional aspects seem to be in relation the least important ones in the residence decision with a mean score of 3.4. The overall high importance of each of the four levels becomes also visible in a more detailed analysis of the ratings.

Focusing on the ratings on the importance of each of the four levels, one can detect that less than 10 percent of the survey respondents rated the appeal of the Netherlands, of personal factors and of university-related factors as not important at all. Also the factors related to the region are perceived as not important at all by only 13 percent. By contrast, each of the four levels was

perceived as important or very important in their residence decision by more than 50 percent of the respondents. More precisely, personal factors, in line with the interview findings, seem to be very prominent with 67.6 percent of the respondents considering them as important or very important.

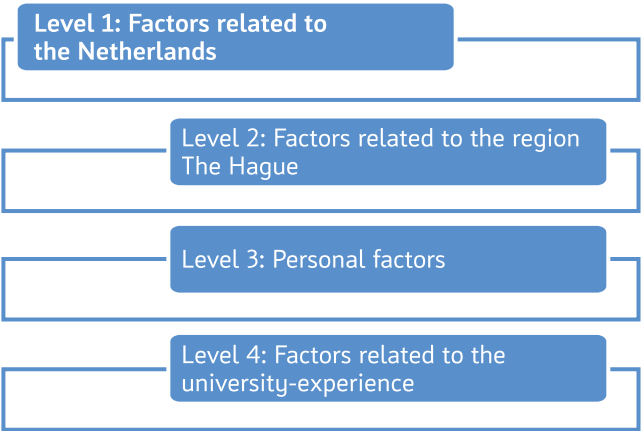


**Figure 6**

To sum up the findings related to this first research questions, it has been shown that both methods, the interviews as well as the survey, uncover a complex set of factors which determine whether international students stay and work in the Netherlands or not. As it seems, personal aspects and job-related considerations are of outstanding importance, but also numerous other points have been mentioned by the respondents. International students' residence decisions are based on a **multitude of factors**. The results indicate that the individual's calculation mostly include aspects from all four levels.

## 4.2 What Are Factors that Bind to the Netherlands?

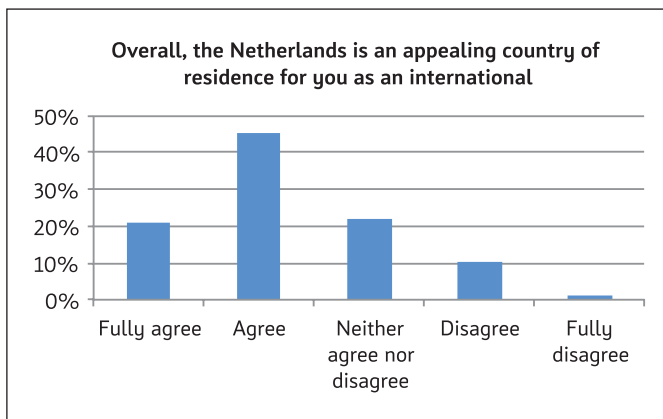
For each of the four levels, the factors, which were perceived as appealing and those, which were judged negatively are presented here.



*Figure 7*

### 4.2.1 Factors related to The Netherlands

The factors which have been allocated to the level of the Netherlands on general cover a broad range of fields. Here, interviewees and survey respondents were asked to express their views regarding aspects related to the Netherlands such as the social and political climate, the economic situation, as well as the Dutch culture. As the figure illustrates, there is in principle certainly a **potential to retain more international graduates**, as 66.3 percent agree or fully agree with the view that overall, the Netherlands is an appealing country of residence. Also in terms of a more detailed assessment of each of the factors related to this level the ratings were rather positive with some exceptions.



**Figure 8**

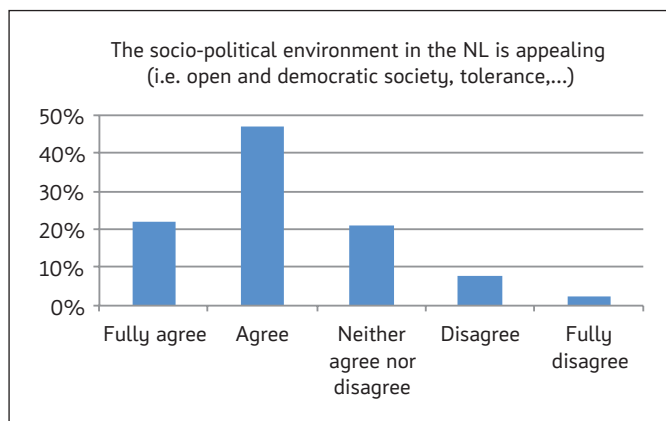
### What is appealing about the Netherlands?

As it seems, in terms of political, cultural and economic aspects the Netherlands is an appealing country of residence for the target groups. When it comes to **economic aspects**, a vast majority of survey respondents (80.5 percent) agrees or fully agrees that the standard of living in the Netherlands is appealing. The view that, in relation to economic aspects, residing in the Netherlands seems to be an attractive option for international graduates is strengthened through the overall positive evaluation of the long-term job perspectives. Here, 52 percent agree or fully agree that long-term career opportunities in the Netherlands are appealing. Interestingly, the rather positive evaluation was independent from whether respondents were interested in pursuing a career in the public sector or in the private sector.

In addition to these economic incentives, also **cultural factors** have received positive scores. Most of the respondents not only perceive the Netherlands as attractive in terms of its economic benefits, but also appreciate aspects of its culture. Only 20.8 percent disagree or fully disagree on the statement that the Dutch culture is appealing. But how do respondents perceive the way the Dutch culture deals with foreigners? Again, as our results suggest, one can speak of a rather positive evaluation, as not more than 18.2 percent agree or fully agree to not feel welcome in the Netherlands. Also the interviews confirmed this positive view on the economic and cultural aspects of the Netherlands. “The international environment and the concentration of diverse

job opportunities” (W.) has been emphasized as well as the Netherlands’ reputation of being “small, nice, open and tolerant towards internationals” (T.). The latter aspect, the supposed tolerance as part of the broader political climate, has also come up in the survey.

When it comes to **political and socio-political characteristics**, such as the democratic and open nature of society and tolerance, more than two-thirds of the respondents expressed positive views.



**Figure 9**

### **What is unappealing about the Netherlands?**

Despite the overall positive evaluation of the factors related to the Netherlands, critical views have been expressed as well. As opposed to the positive view on the socio-political environment in the Netherlands, some have also claimed that “contrarily to the popular presumption, the Netherlands is extremely intolerant” (M.) and that they feel seriously “underprivileged” (Q.) as foreigners. But how could one explain these rather negative remarks with regards to the overall positive evaluation? Possibly the respondents’ country of origin influences whether the factors related to the Netherlands are perceived as rather appealing or unappealing? In fact, in the interviews negative views on the social and cultural climate in the Netherlands have been often raised by participants with a Romanian and Bulgarian background.

Another factor which was not rated as univocally positive refers to administrative aspects. The answers to questions about the respondents' personal experience with administrative burdens, such as visa or residence permits, varied widely. Even though a majority of 54.5 percent agrees or fully agrees that no administrative issues were experienced, an alarming 31.2 percent disagrees or fully disagrees here. This remarkable spread in the rating may be explained by the respondent's respective countries of origin. There appears to be a significant **correlation between the ratings on administrative issues and the respondents' country of birth**. Respondents born in non-EU countries, or in countries like Romania and Bulgaria, which do not yet have full access to the EU labour market, have overwhelmingly criticized administrative burdens in the Netherlands and perceive this as particularly discouraging in their decision to stay in the Netherlands after graduation.



4.2.2 Factors related to the region The Hague

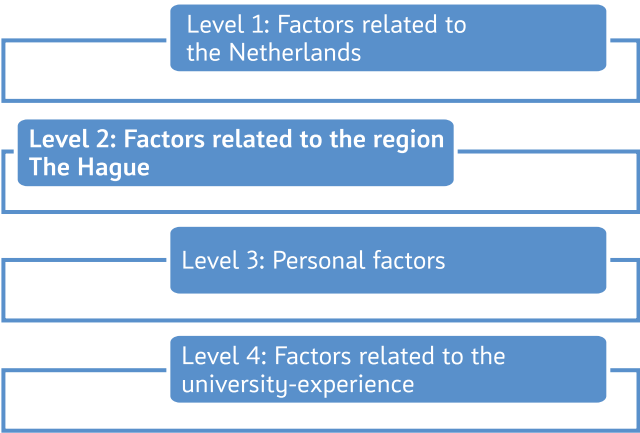


Figure 10

In terms of the general appeal of the region The Hague for international students the questionnaire results display an overall high rating. As the figure below illustrates, a good number of 72.7 percent of the survey respondents agree or fully agree that The Hague is appealing for internationals, whereas not more than 5.2 percent tend to disagree with this view.

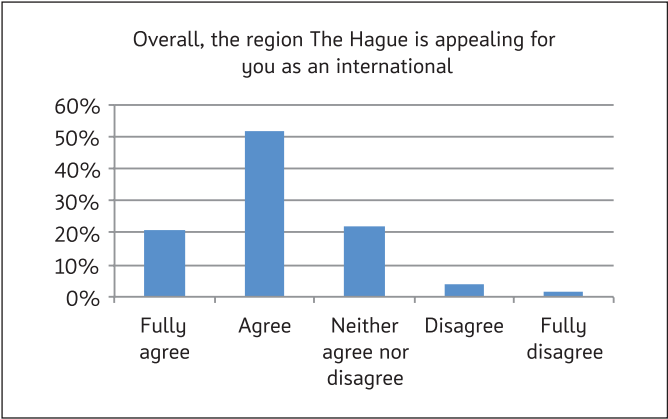


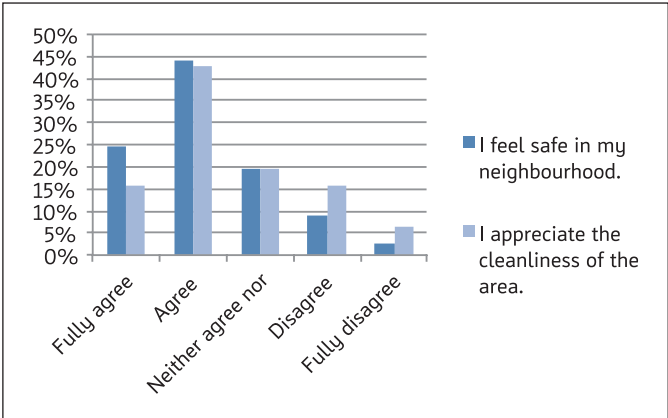
Figure 11



The overall attractiveness of The Hague for internationals is in line with the respondents' rating on the particular factors related to The Hague. These factors touch upon aspects such as the municipal services including public transport and the situation in The Hague's neighbourhoods, but also on offers in terms of leisure time.

**What is appealing about the region The Hague?**

It has been stated that overall The Hague was rated as an appealing region for internationals. This result is supported by the fact that a good number of 58.4 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that they feel welcome as foreigners in The Hague. Both the **safety and the cleanliness in The Hague's neighbourhoods get a positive rating**. Only slightly more than 10 percent of the respondents disagree or fully disagree that they feel safe in their neighbourhood. Also in terms of the cleanliness of neighbourhoods, a majority of 58.4 percent expressed positive views. This impression is supported by the insights gained from the interviews. The safe environment has been mentioned as a “definite staying factor” (W).



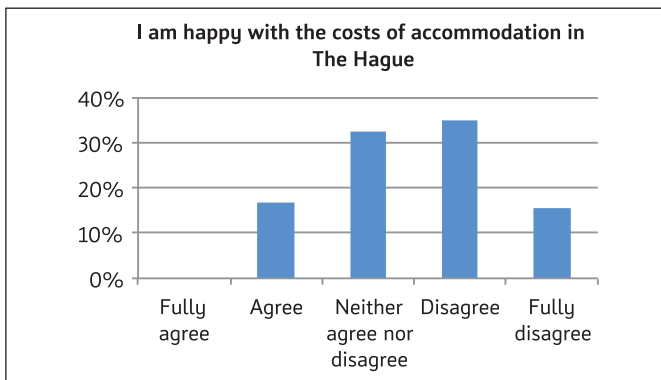
**Figure 12**

Another factor which seems to contribute to the overall attractiveness of The Hague is the **cultural diversity**. It has been mentioned that people “deliberately chose a culturally diverse neighbourhood to live in” (MA.), and that it would be appealing “to see so many nationalities in the streets [...]” (H.). The cultural agenda in The Hague was perceived as appealing for internationals. Here, some 59.7 percent agree or fully agree that **the cultural events are appealing for internationals**. However, it might be worth mentioning that there is a significant difference between the ratings of international students and alumni on the one hand, and on the other hand international staff members. More precisely, based on the insights from the survey, it was mainly the international students and alumni who perceived the cultural agenda in The Hague as appealing. By contrast, the group of international staff members was less enthusiastic. One survey respondent noted that he misses cultural activities such as “going to the theatre or comedy shows, which I cannot visit here because of the language barrier” (Q.). Further factors which explain the general appeal of The Hague for internationals concern the **availability of leisure areas around The Hague**, the **satisfaction with public transport** and municipal services. A vast majority of 70.1 percent finds that there are appealing areas, such as Scheveningen, in the region The Hague to spend leisure time. Even more, precisely 72.2 percent of the survey respondents agree or fully agree that they are happy with the quality of public transport in The Hague. In terms of having equal access to municipal services a majority seems to be satisfied as 27.3 percent of the survey participants felt discriminated as foreigners.



### What is not appealing about the region The Hague

The elements, which are not perceived as positive relate to administrative procedures and housing. One problem that has been raised is that **all administrative letters are in Dutch** (Q.). This was perceived as irritating in particular as the availability of the relevant information on the municipal website in English suggests a more international outlook here (Q.). This distinction between offering online information in English and at the same time communicating offline only in Dutch is mentioned, but this point of criticism is not shared by a majority in the target group. In the survey, not more than 36.4 percent agree or fully agree that the communication of the municipality is only provided in Dutch without any evidence that this has been perceived as unappealing in some way. What appears to be a negative aspect that is in fact shared by a majority of the target group is the quality and cost of accommodation in The Hague. Only 16.9 percent agree or fully agree to be happy with the costs of accommodation in The Hague. Moreover, an alarming number of almost 50 percent of the survey respondents fully agree or agree that the quality of accommodation available in The Hague is insufficient. **Problems related to the price and the quality of accommodation** are seen as the major negative aspect related to the attractiveness of The Hague as a residence place for internationals.



**Figure 13**

4.2.3 Personal factors

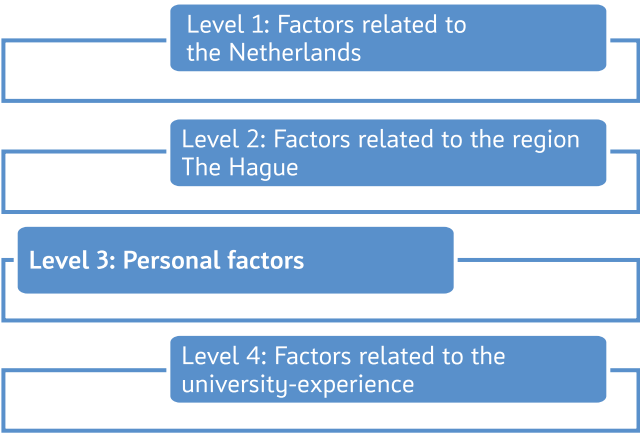


Figure 14

Personal factors appear to be crucial in the residence decision. A vast majority of the target group feels encouraged to reside in the Netherlands on the basis of such personal factors. More than 72 percent agree or fully agree that personal factors motivate them to stay and work in the Netherlands.



Figure 15

But what are these factors that influence the internationals in their residence decision?

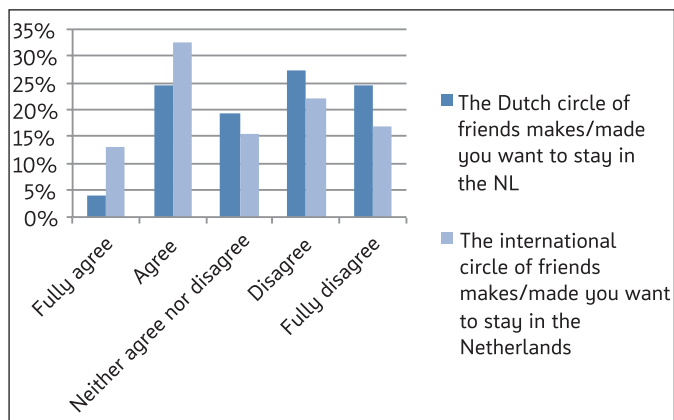
### What are personal factors that bind to the Netherlands?

As the interviews uncovered, considerations often include the international's partner; one interviewee, for example, stated that she "met her partner here in Holland, otherwise I would have gone back" (Ma.). As a matter of fact, slightly more than one-third of the questionnaire respondents agree or fully agree that they **reside in the Netherlands because their partner works and lives here**. Also in terms of establishing a family, the respondents perceived the Netherlands as appealing. Here, only 9.1 percent disagree or fully disagree with the statement that the Netherlands provide a family-friendly environment. It has been raised that "the possibility to have a family here [is one thing that] makes me want to stay in the Netherlands" (Q.) Thus, it appears that next to partner-related factors which can bind internationals to the Netherlands, the country offers an **appealing environment for those who consider establishing a family**. In addition to partner and family considerations, also friendships can affect whether internationals stay and work in the Netherlands or not.



## What are personal factors that are not appealing?

Concerning the importance of friendships, the survey results uncover a remarkable aspect: The number of respondents who agree or fully agree that their **international circle of friends is a reason to stay in the Netherlands (45.5 percent)** is significantly higher than the number of respondents who agree or fully agree with the same statement in relation to their **Dutch friends (28.6 percent)**.



**Figure 16**

The difference may indicate that many international students are more embedded in a network of internationals, than with the local Dutch people. One respondent confirmed: “Expats all stay in their expat bubble. It is very difficult to integrate” (Q.). Of course, this phenomenon may have diverse reasons. It does not necessarily mean that the Dutch society is excluding internationals. In fact, a majority of respondents did not agree, or fully disagreed, with the statement that Dutch fellow students and colleagues exclude internationals from their circles. It has been commented that also internationals may lack an interest in integrating: “Many expats live here for 10 years and have never gone to Delft – they only go to Schiphol and back: Shame.” (Q.). In any case, the aspect of integrating internationals into Dutch social circles would be certainly worth a further discussion, especially since personal factors have been indicated as decisive for the residence decision, or as one respondent stated: “Personal connections are perhaps the most important appeal [to stay in the Netherlands]” (Q.).

4.2.4 Factors related to university

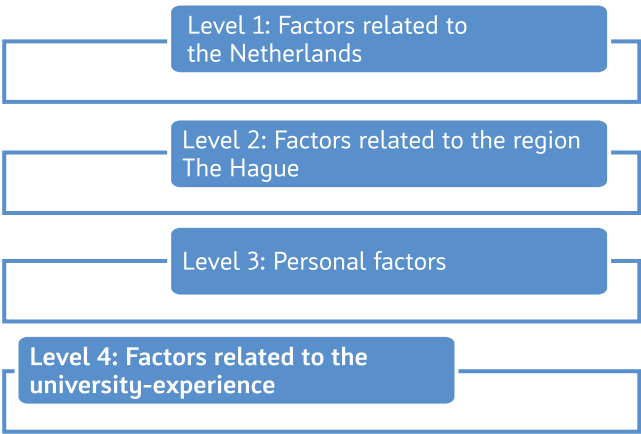


Figure 17

Some 58.5 percent of the respondents agree or strongly agree that the experience at The Hague University of Applied Sciences motivates them to stay in the Netherlands.

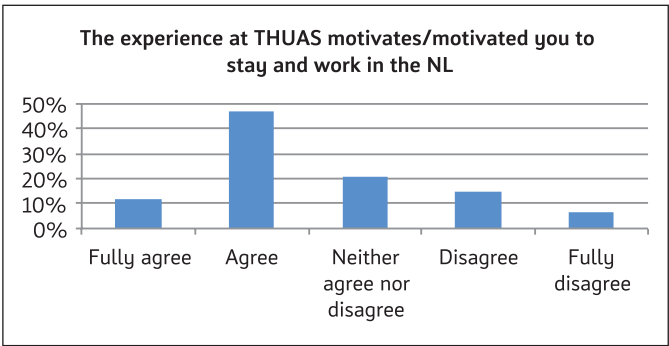


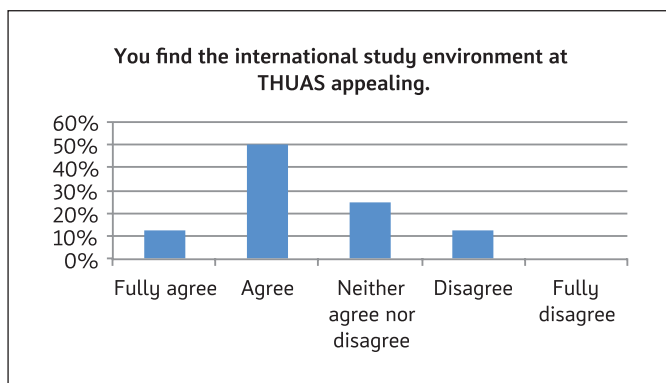
Figure 18

The target group’s experience at The Hague University of Applied Sciences was to a large extent motivating them to stay in the Netherlands. What are the concrete factors that make the university experience a positive factor in the internationals’ residence decision.



### What is appealing about the university experience?

As it appears, the most prominent appealing factor related to the university experience at The Hague University of Applied Sciences consists of the international study environment. In the interviews, participants praised the cultural diversity at The Hague University of Applied Sciences as being “very motivating and positive” (Ma.). As M. stated, the “cultural diversity is [...] one of The Hague University’s charms”. Survey results emphasize this impression, as a vast majority of respondents (more than 80 percent) agree or fully agree that the **international study environment at The Hague University of Applied Sciences is appealing**.



**Figure 19**

Possibly the international study environment contributes to the fact that a good number of both international staff members (58.4 percent) and international students/alumni (83.1 percent), agree or fully agree that they feel ‘at home’ as internationals at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. This depends to a statistically significant degree on whether he or she felt being discriminated against or not.

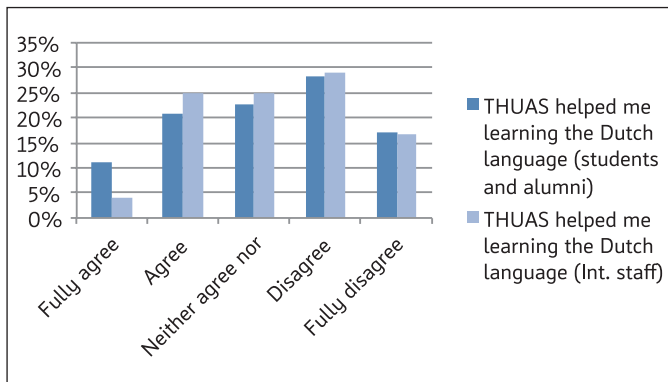
A majority disagree when being asked whether they experience discrimination at the university. Yet, the results slightly differ between international students and alumni on the one hand, and international staff members on the other hand. Whereas, for the former subgroup only 11.3 percent agree or fully agree that, as internationals, they felt discriminated against, among the

international staff members a remarkably higher percentage, precisely 29.3 percent, expressed that they felt discriminated against as internationals at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Possible reasons for this perceived discrimination on the side of some international staff members were indicated in the interviews and also in the comments in the survey, where it was criticized that “all the management and research meetings are held in Dutch”(Q.) and furthermore that international staff would be “kept away from any real role or power” (Q.). By contrast, on the side of international alumni and students no such comments were raised.

Further positive factors refer to the level and the focus of education at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. A majority of the target group appreciates the level of education provided at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. In terms of the focus of education, meaning the applied-sciences approach, a good percentage of 67.9 of the survey respondents agree or fully agree that they appreciate this approach, whereas only 9.4 percent disagree here. However, in relation to the focus of education also criticisms have been raised. In particular, participants in our study highlighted the need to make clear the distinct features of the applied-sciences-approach. One interviewee maintained that “for students [...] the most important thing is to know the difference between HBO and research university” (W.), as this matter might otherwise raise confusion and frustration among international students.

### **What is unappealing about the university experience?**

Two aspects in relation to the experience at university that have been rather critically discussed by the participants in our study refer to the university’s support in starting a professional career and learning the Dutch language. Many interviewees have stated that it is essential for foreigners to learn Dutch in order to stay and work in the Netherlands after the studies. Here, it seems that a majority would expect more support from the university. As the following figure shows, less than 50 percent of the survey respondents agree or fully agree that The Hague University of Applied Sciences helped them learning the Dutch language.



**Figure 20**

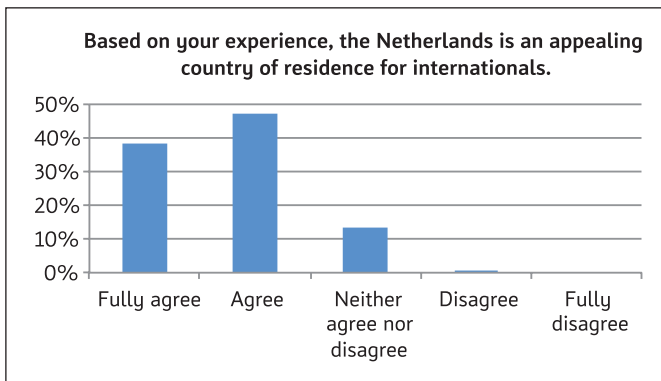
Some, but not all, departments do offer mandatory Dutch language courses. As it has been stated, interviewees wish that **“Dutch language course should be a compulsory part of the curriculum of every international program”** (Q.). In that sense, universities could help international students to start up a life in the Netherlands after their studies. In the same way, the study has shown that **career counselling and concrete support in finding a job after the studies could be fostered**. More than 80 percent of the respondents did not agree that The Hague University of Applied Sciences sufficiently provides career counselling. Moreover, not more than 9.4 percent agree or fully agree that The Hague University of Applied Sciences actively supports the international students to find a job in the Netherlands. Finally, one minor factor in relation to university that has been raised as potentially discouraging international students to stay in the Netherlands after graduating derives from the unclear recognition of HBO bachelor degrees. It has been mentioned that internationals who hold a HBO degree might be pushed to leave the Netherlands for Master studies, simply because their degree is not recognized by Dutch research universities.

### 4.3 Validating the Findings – The NL4Talents Survey

So far the data was only collected at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. To justify a broader generalizability of the insights, a larger dataset would be valuable. For this purpose, the preliminary findings of the study have been presented and discussed at the Nuffic NL4Talents conference in February 2013. During a special workshop, the participants were asked to compare their views with the research findings. All talented final year international students who participated in the conference furthermore received a questionnaire. The comments that have been raised during the workshop as well as the results of the questionnaire ( $n_{\text{survey NL4Talents}} = 114$ ) will be briefly presented in the following.

#### Findings related to the Netherlands

In relation to factors concerning the Netherlands in general, the NL4Talents questionnaire results confirm the trend of the main study. When asked about the general appeal of the Netherlands as a country of residence for internationals, a large majority responded positively. As the figure shows, 85.5 percent of the participants found the Netherlands in general appealing.



**Figure 21**

This recalls the fact that the previous study has suggested a rather positive view on concrete factors such as the standard of living in the Netherlands, the socio-political climate as well as the long-term career perspectives. Again, the NL4Talents results validate these results. Here, some 93.6 percent agree or fully agree that the standard of living in the NL is appealing. Furthermore, 78.2 percent find the open, democratic and tolerant nature of the Dutch society appealing and less than 5 percent disagree that there are promising career opportunities in the long-term in the Netherlands. When it comes to the rather unappealing factors related to the Netherlands, in the NL4Talents questionnaire almost 25 percent expressed their unease with administrative issues. In that context, again many participants complained about the restrictions on residence permits for non-EU citizens as well as a supposed bias in terms of embracing foreigners. Exemplarily for this view, one participant stated that “the Netherlands is a great place for Europeans; it is not very receptive to foreigners especially of African decent” (Q.).



### **Findings related to Regional Factors**

Regarding the appealing or unappealing factors related to the region of residence, the NL4Talents questionnaire results display an overall positive view of the international students. This is remarkable insofar as the respondents are located in diverse regions of the Netherlands, but nonetheless seem to agree in the appreciation of several regional aspects. Similar to the assessment in the previous study, significant strong points were the cleanliness and the safety of neighbourhoods. Both factors were appreciated by more than 80 percent of the respondents. Also in terms of the critical remarks on the regional factors, there is a similarity between both surveys. Again, a large number of respondents, 55.5 percent, were explicitly unhappy about the costs of accommodation, and almost 35 percent agree that the quality of accommodation in their region of residence is insufficient. Hence, problems regarding the cost and quality of housing, that have been outlined as possibly discouraging factors in the previous study, were also raised in the NL4Talents survey.

### **Findings related to Personal Factors**

It has been described that the personal factors, which consist of the considerations on aspects such as family, partner, or friends, can be very influential in international students' residence decisions. This view is encouraged by the fact that in the NL4Talents questionnaire, 84.5 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that there are personal factors, which make the Netherlands an appealing country of residence. Again, within the level of personal factors the rating on how family-friendly the Netherlands is remarkably good. Not more than 10 percent disagree with the view that the Netherlands does provide a family-friendly environment.

One aspect that was critically discussed in the context of the study's findings was the difference between international student's bonds to other internationals and to locals. It is worth noting that the NL4Talent questionnaire findings uncover the same difference. Whereas 37 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that their international friends make them want to stay here, only 23.6 percent expressed agreement with the statement that their Dutch circle of friends would bind them to the Netherlands. Here, it is interesting that at least 41.8 percent of the respondents, and this again

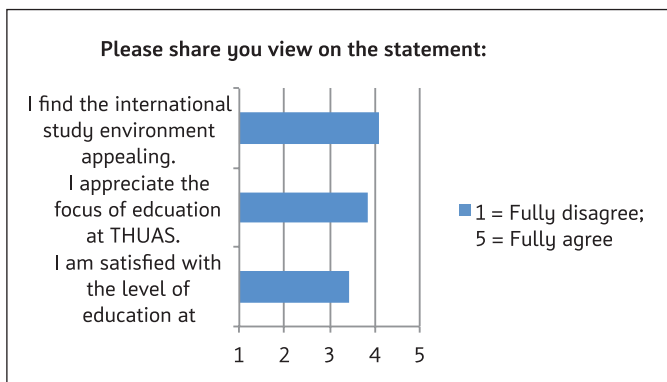
corresponds with the previous findings, find it difficult to establish friendships with Dutch people. Additionally, it was uncovered that almost every third participant agrees with the statement that Dutch fellow students would exclude Internationals from their circles. These results not only resemble the findings stated earlier, but also indicate the importance of encouraging that international students and Dutch people interact and mingle in order to help establishing personal bonds.

### **Findings related to the university-experience**

Concerning the factors related to university, there is reason to believe that the institutions of higher education can in fact contribute to the international students' willingness to stay and work in the Netherlands. This view is reinforced by the results of the NL4Talents survey, as 86.4 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that their study experience at the respective institutions of higher education in the Netherlands has contributed to their overall appreciation of the country.







**Figure 22**

As the mean ratings outlined in the figure indicate, appealing factors were again the level and focus of education as well as the diversity within the university. In more detail, a good number of 80.9 percent of the respondents agree that the international study environment at their institution of higher education is appealing. An even greater 86.4 percent of the international students who filled in the NL4Talents questionnaire, seem to be happy with the focus of the education at their university. Also in terms of the level of education, 80 percent expressed their satisfaction.

The results of the study can also be validated in terms of one of the rather critical factors related to the university-experience, namely the university's support in learning the Dutch language. Only 25.5 percent of the NL4Talents respondents felt that their institution of higher education helped them to learn the Dutch language, and 30.9 percent were indifferent about the matter.

Thus, overall it can be stated that the **main findings** of the study presented in this paper are **supported by the results of the follow-up data collection** which addressed international students who participated in the Nuffic NL4Talents conference as there are no significant differences between both datasets. The insights from the workshop and the questionnaire data certainly increase the confidence in the findings of the original study as there were **no contradictory results between the study and the follow-up questionnaire**.



# 5 Discussion

## 5.1 Multiple Factors in Internationals' Residence Decisions

It was the first aim of this research to find out about the factors which are relevant in the decisions of international students and knowledge workers to stay and work in the Netherlands. The results of this study suggest that job-related factors are of outstanding importance. This indicated by both, interviews and questionnaire results. Hence, in this respect the findings are **in line with previous studies that have also highlighted the prominence of career considerations and employment opportunities** in residence decisions (Berkhout, Smid & Volkerink, 2010, p. ix; Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 38). The second main consideration that has been uncovered in this study refers to personal factors. Apparently, many international students' decision on whether to stay on after graduation or not are influenced by the plans of their partner, family, or friends. Interestingly, here the **findings do contradict previous views that have suggested a much lower significance of friends, family, and personal relationships** (cf. Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 39).

By no means should the considerations of international students in their residence decision after the studies be interpreted as merely two-dimensional. Even though job-related factors and personal factors appear to be most prominent, several other factors have been rated as important in this study. It is therefore suggested to speak of a rather complex consideration in which a multitude of factors can be influential. This suggestion resembles what has been proposed in earlier studies, for example in Lowell's multi-levelled model of factors for highly-skilled migration covering economic aspects but also sociological indices such as social networks (Lowell, 2009, p. 53). This **supposed complexity of international students' residence decision** is in particular interesting with regard to the interest of policy-makers and will affect the recommendations which derive from the study. But what are the further factors that have been uncovered in this study?

The factors that have been allocated to the regional level, among them considerations about the safety and cleanliness of the neighbourhood, but also opportunities to enjoy the leisure time and cultural offers, have been largely disregarded by previous studies. Most of these studies have focused on macro-factors on a national scale such as the labour market and the way of life in the respective host country (Lowell, 2009; Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012) but to a lesser extent examined the above mentioned local or regional aspects. By contrast, this study asserts that such regional factors are certainly influential when international students decide whether to stay after their studies or not. This is explainable as the regional or even local environment is where internationals make their every-day experiences and develop a connection to the respective place or not. As it appears, the rather abstract concept of ‘feeling at home’ can be linked to more concrete factors such as the international character of the region, the way the cultural agenda is tailored to the demands of internationals and more. In any case, **the study proposes to put more weight on the importance of regional factors than earlier investigations did.**

Lastly, also factors related to the experience at international students’ institutions of higher education are important in their residence decision. In that sense, the **findings fully support the claim raised in the report on an earlier large investigation, that the study experience affects the students’ propensity to stay on** (cf. Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 51). What has been in particular highlighted in the previous study by the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration is the importance of language courses. Our study encourages this view and additionally suggests that further university-related aspects such as the internationality of the study environment, the level of education provided at university, and the availability of career counselling can influence the international students’ willingness to reside in the respective country.

## 5.2 The Netherlands' Appeal as a Country of Residence

Regarding the second main aim of this study, namely to find out about the appealing and unappealing factors of the Netherlands, the overall ratings resemble the finding of a study conducted among highly-skilled migrants in 2010 (*cf.* Berkhout, Smid & Volkerink, 2010). In this earlier study, the highly-skilled migrants assigned **overall positive scores to the Netherlands in relation to several factors**. The majority of international students perceived the Netherlands in general, but also the regional environment, the personal aspects and the university experience, as appealing. Despite this overall positive outlook, some factors on all four levels have been evaluated rather critically by the respondents.

What can explain the positive overall assessment of the Netherlands as a country of residence? In particular the **standard of living and career perspectives** are very highly appreciated. Also the results of a most recent study undertaken on the request of the SER of the Netherlands draws similar conclusions. Here, job-related aspects, such as finding interesting work, have been crucial when international students were asked about what makes it attractive for them to stay in the Netherlands (*cf.* SER, 2013). Considering the fact that such job-related considerations have been proven to be particularly important, the appeal of the Netherlands in that respect can be a strength in binding international talent. One qualification, however, that derives from our study is that the **availability of concrete job offers was rated significantly lower than the appeal of long-term career opportunities**. Apparently, the Netherlands provides for an environment - in terms of the quality of life, the working environment, the career perspectives, and so on - in which international students would like to start their career, but does not manage to nourish these motivations with sufficient concrete job offers. One further and more significant source of unease about factors related to the Netherlands that is made explicit in other studies' findings was that some respondents claimed to feel underprivileged. Regarding the overall socio-political climate but also in terms of the **administrative issues**, such as receiving the relevant permit or visa, a number of participants were unhappy. Apparently, such discontent was more often expressed by participants from countries which are not part of the European Union or do not yet have full access to the labour market such as Romania and Bulgaria.

As noted above, the regional factors that may influence international students in their residence decision seem to be less regarded in previous studies on the field. As the findings of this research indicate, the region The Hague deserves the label as being an area with an outstanding international character. As a matter of fact, when asked about the **attractiveness of the region The Hague for internationals**, a vast majority of participants expressed positive views. What may contribute to this positive assessment is that the cleanliness and safety in the neighbourhoods of The Hague have been rated as attractive. Also the availability of opportunities to enjoy leisure time and the cultural agenda were generally perceived as appealing. By contrast, there is **room for improvement in terms of the quality and cost for accommodation in The Hague**. In fact, the latter aspects have been rated as particularly unappealing by a good number of the respondents regardless of whether they were members of the international staff and therefore financially better-equipped, or international students.

Personal factors can be one of the main aspects which bind international students and knowledge workers to the Netherlands. A **good number of internationals stay and work in the Netherlands because they have their partner here**. Also the recent study of the SER outlines that 16.4 percent of the respondents state that the fact that their partner lives in the Netherlands makes them want to stay here (SER, 2013). For most of those who take considerations about establishing a family into account, the Netherlands are appealing due to the **family-friendly environment**. Next to a partner or family, the circle of friends can motivate internationals to stay and work in the Netherlands. Interestingly, the results indicate that internationals are more embedded in an international circle of friends than with Dutch locals. How can we make sense of this peculiar result? In fact, there is no evidence in this study's data that a majority of internationals feels active discrimination or exclusion from Dutch circles. Nonetheless, it has been uncovered that a good number of international students find it **difficult to socialize with Dutch circles**. At the same time, it has been mentioned that there is often a lack of active integration on the side of the international students themselves. In any case, in terms of the international students' integration into Dutch circles, there seems to be a potential for improvement with regards to the aim to bind internationals.

Finally, a significant contribution to the overall satisfaction with the study experience seems to be grounded in the fact that a vast majority of participants have emphasized the **appeal of the international study environment** at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. This factor together with the fact that only very few felt being discriminated against at university might have contributed to the fact that a majority of internationals feels at home at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Also in terms of the focus and level of education, a majority of respondents was satisfied. This might be a reason why, as the SER study suggests, some 14.6 percent of their participants wants to do follow-up studies in the Netherlands after graduation. When it comes to the rather negative aspects about the university experience, two factors that have been seen rather critically touch on the problems of learning the Dutch language and career counseling. Firstly, many respondents find that the university was not actively helping them to learn the Dutch language. A similar result has been stated in a study on international students in Germany revealing that the intentions to stay in the host country are often associated with the respective language skills (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration 2012, p. 51). The problem here is that students do often not need to speak the host country's language during their studies, but are confronted with such requirements when looking for a job.





### 5.3 Other Studies

Parallel to this investigation, two related studies were completed. The first is an exploration by Agentschap NL (AgNL, 2013) with, in the annex, a study by Wit & Ripmeester (2012), which analyses the policies and initiatives to retain foreign students in four European countries. The second is the Advice of the Social and Economic Council (SER) of the Netherlands (SER, 2013b), including the underlying analysis (SER, 2013c) and the previously mentioned online survey among 500 foreign students (SER, 2013a). In most aspects, both studies reinforce the findings our study, which were initially limited to the foreign students, alumni, and staff of The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

The study requested by Agentschap NL confirms our findings that personal factors and job-related aspects are the two most prominent motivations for international students to stay in their host country (Wit & Ripmeester, 2013, p. 11). Moreover, the importance of learning the Dutch language and further attachments with the Dutch culture is mentioned in the study and resembles the insights of our investigation (AgNL, 2013, p. 4). Also our thesis that the Dutch institutions of higher education can play a key role in retaining more international students is validated by the study. In addition to providing Dutch language courses, Dutch universities may intensify internship offers and career counseling in order to bind foreign students to the Dutch job market (AgNL, 2013, p. 5). Similar to our study, the experiences in other European countries show that key aspects in retaining international talent are an international orientation within the university as well as assistance with the transition between studies and professional career (Wit & Ripmeester, 2012, p. 29).

The recent study undertaken by the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands suggests that the main factors for international students to stay in their host country can be categorized in three broad clusters, the job-market including the relevant preparation during the study, the Dutch culture, including language and the social life in the Netherlands, and thirdly practical aspects such as accommodation and regulations (SER, 2013c, p. 21). The most prominent factors categorized in these three clusters again resemble

the findings of our study. As the SER analysis illustrates, main themes which may make the Netherlands more attractive as a country of residence for international students are Dutch language courses, a simplification of regulations and permits, career fairs and further assistance in looking for a job (SER, 2013c, p. 21).

Hence, two recent studies initiated by Agentschap NL and by the SER support the main findings of our investigation in terms of the general appeal of the Netherlands for international students as well as in terms of the factors that would make international students want to stay in the Netherlands. Based on these insights both studies develop strategic advice on how to bind international students. The publication of Agentschap NL argues for an approach on three levels. On the local level, improvements of municipal services and housing conditions can help to make the international students feel 'at home'; on the regional level, the report calls for a better coordination between institutions of higher education and business aiming for an improved transition from studies to professional life; finally, on the national level the authorities should identify sectors in which the shortage of highly-skilled is particularly significant (AgNL, 2013, p.11). Also the SER report concludes with advices on three levels. Firstly, the national, regional, and local authorities in the Netherlands should, based on a central strategy, improve the existing regulations, the access to information and facilitate administrative procedures; secondly, institutions of higher education may develop further the international classroom approach, the assistance in practical problems related to everyday life and career prospects, and the offer of Dutch language courses; organisations and businesses may contribute in developing the image of the Netherlands as an appealing country to work in specific sectors (SER, 2013b, pp. 16). The concrete recommendations that derive from the findings of our study will be presented in the following.



**Recommendation**

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

In response to the first key question of this research, namely what are the factors that are decisive in the residence decision of highly-skilled internationals after their studies, the findings suggest that in fact a multitude of aspects must be considered. In line with what previous studies have suggested, job-related factors appear to be of primary importance. But also personal factors related to partner, family, and friends seem to be decisive. In addition to these most prominent factors, the findings uncover that many further aspects influence the willingness of international students to stay in the Netherlands. In fact, what they consider is a complex set of factor including job-related and personal factors, but also further factors related to the Netherlands in general, to the region in which they live and to their experience at university.

Concerning the second main aim of this investigation – to find out about what motivates international students' to stay in the Netherlands and what rather discourages them to do so – the study concludes that overall, the participants views were positive. The Netherlands in general, the region The Hague, the personal circumstances as well as the study experience at The Hague University of Applied Sciences were rated as positive and appealing by a majority of respondents. In that sense, one can confirm a reasonable potential to succeed in retaining more international students in the future. With regard to this aim, policies might be developed which emphasize the many strengths that have been pointed out, but in particular address the factors which this study's findings suggest to be rather unappealing. In fact, such policies may be developed on several levels, nationally, regionally, or within the specific sector of higher education.

To conclude with some recommendations for each of the four levels of investigation:

- Concerning the first level of factors, the aspects related to the Netherlands, it seems that the most urgent problem to be addressed is that a significant group of international students, namely those who do not enjoy all freedoms that come with the EU citizenship, feels to be underprivileged and excluded due to administrative burdens. Also the recent results of the SER study uncover that 48.2 percent of their target group wish for **a simplification of procedures concerning regulations and permits**. As long as these students do face remarkable administrative issues, it seems unrealistic to motivate them to stay and work here.
- One point that could be discussed at a regional level refers to the **problems related to housing**. Again, the quality and cost of accommodation has been criticized as unappealing by a good number of respondents regardless of their income. Apart from this negative point, it seems that The Hague displays an attractive region of residence and a trump card in binding international students.
- In terms of the personal level, it appears to be advisable to **encourage that international students do socialize more with the Dutch people**. These bonds can contribute to retain internationals after their studies. More concretely, distinguishing, formally or informally, between international dorms and student housing for local students seems to be counterproductive. Instead, it could be fostered that **Dutch students and international students live together**. The same rationale can be extended to the classroom, where policies could **promote the international classroom including Dutch students**. The latter aspects leads us to the fourth level, the recommendations related to the universities.

- The two most prominent demands that could be addressed within universities are the availability of Dutch language courses and concrete career counselling. The former has been prominently discussed in the context of this study. Many internationals feel that the lack of free Dutch language courses at universities is seriously discouraging when it comes to the decision to stay in the Netherlands. The fact that other studies support this view (*cf.* SER, 2013) highlights the importance of the issue and need to **increase the offer of Dutch language courses**. Also an intensified **career counseling and career fairs may help to bind more international students**. These could take place in, or be at least promoted by, the institutions of higher education. Moreover, offering a broader catalogue of Master programmes at Dutch universities of applied sciences could help to retain more international students that have problems with the recognition of their *hbo bachelor degree* for Master studies at Dutch research universities.







# 7 Appendices

## I Interview Guide

The interviewer introduces the interviewee to the research.

### **What Would Make You Want to Stay in the Netherlands – or not?**

The Research Group International Cooperation looks at the phenomenon of graduate mobility. Your responses will contribute to our understanding of the factors, which determine whether international graduates stay and work in the Netherlands after their studies. Please note the following statements:

- You are invited to participate in this research as a member of one of our three target groups, namely: (a) International students at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, (b) International Alumni, and (c) International Staff at THUAS.
- The data you will disclose in this interview will solely be used for the purpose of this research project. Insights will be only used with the interviewee explicit permission. Therefore, the interviewee will be asked to read and sign a consent form after the interview.
- The personal information that you disclose will not be shared. We strictly follow the academic standards in preserving your anonymity and ensuring the confidentiality of the information.
- If you would like to learn more about the research project, please contact: Andreas Funk; Research Assistant; Kenniskring International Cooperation: [afunk@hhs.nl](mailto:afunk@hhs.nl).



## A. General

The interviewer collects some basic information on the interviewee:

- 1 Please select. You are...*Staff member at THUAS/Student at THUAS/Alumnus from THUAS*
- 2 For staff members: *Teaching staff/Administrative staff*
- 3 For students: *European studies/ICM/Process & Food Technology/ IBMS/Law/Other*
- 4 For Alumni: *Employee part-time/Employee full-time/Self-employed/Unemployed/Student*
- 5 What is your gender? *Female/Male/Other*
- 6 What is your year of birth?
- 7 What is your country of birth?
- 8 What is the highest level of education one of your parents has achieved? *Complete primary school/Complete secondary school/Post-secondary education*
- 9 How would you evaluate your academic competencies? *Very good/Good/Fair/Poor/Very poor*
- 10 How would you rate your level of career ambition? *Very high/High/Moderate/Low/Very low*
- 11 Concerning your professional career, which sector do you prefer? *Public sector/Private sector*
- 12 After your studies you may not need to work immediately. How well were you/will you be equipped financially (supported by parents, state aid, etc.)?  
*Very well equipped/Well equipped/Moderately equipped/Badly equipped/Very badly equipped/ Don't know*

## **B. Open Questions**

The interviewer invites the interviewee to share his thoughts on the topic and makes notes.

What are the factors which determine the interviewee's residence decision?

What is particularly appealing or unappealing in the interviewee's view?

## **C. Probing and Discussion of Possible Factors on Four Levels**

After giving the interviewee the possibility to share the spontaneous views, the interviewer may start probing in order to uncover more details on possible factors. In order to structure the discussion, the interviewer introduces the four levels of factors, namely factors related to The Netherlands, factors related to the region/municipality, personal factors, and factors related to the university experience. In particular, the interviewer tries to find out whether these levels are equally important or not.

In your residence decision after your studies, how important is/was the attractiveness of The Netherlands as a host country, the attractiveness of the region/municipality, the personal factors, or the university-related factors?

## **D. Validating and Enriching the List of Possible Factors**

Now, the interviewer invites the interviewee to go through the list of possible factors in order to validate and enrich the list.

Possible factors related to NL:

*Job offer*

*Long-term career opportunities*

*Standard of living*

*Dutch culture*

*Socio-political climate*

*Etc.*

Possible factors related to the region/municipality:

*Safe neighbourhood*

*Cultural agenda/events*

*Cleanliness of the area*

*Costs of accommodation*

*Quality of accommodation*

*Access to municipal services*

*Etc.*

Possible personal factors:

*Partner lives/works in the NL*

*Circle of Dutch friends*

*Circle of International friends*

*Etc.*

Possible factors related to University:

*Level of education*

*International study environment*

*Dutch language courses*

*Career counseling*

*Etc.*

## **E. Final Comments and Consent**

Finally, the interviewee is invited to share thoughts that have not been covered in the discussion so far. Afterwards, the interviewee is asked to sign the consent form. The interviewee will also receive and approve a brief report several days after the interview.

## II Questionnaire Design

### **What Would Make You Want to Stay in The Netherlands – or not?**

The Research Group International Cooperation looks at the phenomenon of graduate mobility. Your responses will contribute to our understanding of the factors, which determine whether international graduates stay and work in the Netherlands after their studies. It takes an average of 5 minutes to fill out the questions of this survey. Please note the following statements:

- You are invited to participate in this research as a member of one of our three target groups, namely: (a) International students at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, (b) International Alumni, and (c) International Staff at THUAS.
- The data you will disclose in this survey will solely be used for the purpose of this research project.
- The personal information that you disclose will not be shared. We strictly follow the academic standards in preserving your anonymity and ensuring the confidentiality of the information.
- If you would like to learn more about the research project, please contact: Andreas Funk; Research Assistant; Kenniskring International Cooperation: [afunk@hhs.nl](mailto:afunk@hhs.nl).



## A. General

- 1 Please select. You are...*Staff member at THUAS/Student at THUAS/Alumnus from THUAS*
- 2 For staff members: *Teaching staff/Administrative staff*
- 3 For students: *European studies/ICM/Process & Food Technology/ IBMS/Law/Other*
- 4 For Alumni: *Employee part-time/Employee full-time/Self-employed/Unemployed/Student*
- 5 What is your gender? *Female/Male/Other*
- 6 What is your year of birth?
- 7 What is your country of birth?
- 8 What is the highest level of education one of your parents has achieved?  
*Complete primary school/Complete secondary school/Post-secondary education*
- 9 How would you evaluate your academic competencies?  
*Very good/Good/Fair/Poor/Very poor*
- 10 How would you rate your level of career ambition?  
*Very high/High/Moderate/Low/Very low*
- 11 Concerning your professional career, which sector do you prefer?  
*Public sector/Private sector*
- 12 After your studies you may not need to work immediately. How well were you/will you be equipped financially (supported by parents, state aid, etc.)?  
*Very well equipped/Well equipped/Moderately equipped/Badly equipped/Very badly equipped/ Don't know*

## **B. The Netherlands as a country of residence**

In this section, we would like to find out about your perception of the Netherlands as a country of residence for Internationals.

- 13 Overall, the Netherlands is an appealing country of residence for you as an International?

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

- 14 Now, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

‘I appreciate the concrete job offers in the NL I have/had after graduation.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I appreciate the long-term career opportunities in the NL.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The standard of living in the NL is appealing.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The Dutch culture is appealing.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I appreciate the Dutch working attitude.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The socio-political environment in the NL is appealing (i.e. open, democratic society, tolerance).’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I am facing no administrative issues i.e. working/residence permit and visa requirements.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘Information of the government is only provided in Dutch.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As a foreigner, I do not feel welcome in the Netherlands.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

- 15 In your residence decision after your studies, how important is/was the attractiveness of The Netherlands as a host country?

*Very important/Important/Moderately important/Slightly important/Not important at all*

- 16 If you have further comments on appealing or unappealing aspects of the Netherlands as a country to stay and work after the studies, please share them with us:

### C. The Hague as a city of residence

Now, we would like to focus on the attractiveness of the region Den Haag for you as an International.

- 17 Overall, the region/ municipality The Hague is appealing for you as an International.

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

- 18 Now, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning regional/local attributes of the area The Hague:

‘I appreciate the climate in the region.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I feel safe in my neighbourhood.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The cultural agenda/events are appealing for me as an International.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I appreciate the cleanliness of the area.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I am happy with the costs of accommodation in The Hague.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The usual quality of accommodation available in The Hague is insufficient.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As a foreigner, I do not have equal access to municipal services in The Hague.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I am happy with the quality of public transport.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘There are appealing leisure areas (i.e. Scheveningen).’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The city of The Hague makes you feel welcome as a foreigner.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘Communication of the municipality is only provided in Dutch.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

- 19 In your residence decision after your studies, how important is/was the attractiveness of the region of residence (Den Haag and Randstad)?

*Very important/Important/Moderately important/Slightly important/Not important at all*

20 If you have further comments on appealing or unappealing aspects of The Hague as a region to stay and work after the studies, please share them with us:

#### **D. Personal factors**

In this part, we would like to find out about the personal factors which motivate/motivated you to stay in the Netherlands- or not.

21 There are personal factors which motivate/motivated you to stay/work in the Netherlands after your studies?

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

22 How do you feel about the following statements?

‘I reside/resided in the NL because my partner works/lives here.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘My Dutch circle of friends makes/made me want to stay in the Netherlands.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘My International friends make/made me want to stay in the Netherlands.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As a foreigner, I find it difficult to establish friendships with Dutch people.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I feel at home in the Netherlands.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘Dutch fellow students and colleagues exclude Internationals from their circles.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The Netherlands provide a family-friendly environment.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

23 In your residence decision after your studies, how important are/were personal factors (i.e. family, partner)?

*Very important/Important/Moderately important/Slightly important/Not important at all*

24 Are there any further personal aspects which influence/influenced your decision whether to stay and work in the Netherlands? Please share your views:



## E. Factors related to experience at your institution of higher education

Finally, please share with us in how far your experience at the institution of higher education influenced/influences your residence decision after the studies.

25 The experience at The Hague University of Applied Sciences motivates/motivated you to stay in the Netherlands?

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

26 Now, please share your view on the following statements related to your experiences at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

‘I appreciate the focus of education (‘Applied-Sciences-approach’) at THUAS.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘I find the international study environment at THUAS appealing.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘THUAS sufficiently provided career counseling.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As an International, I felt discriminated against at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As an International, I felt ‘at home’ at THUAS.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘As a foreigner, I am/was not able to receive all relevant information in the English language (e.g. on the portal).’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The Hague University of Applied Sciences actively supports foreign students to find a job in the Netherlands after their studies.’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

‘The Hague University of Applied Sciences helped me learning the Dutch language (e.g. through language courses).’

*Fully agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Fully disagree*

27 In your residence decision after your studies, how important is/was your general experience at THUAS?

*Very important/Important/Moderately important/Slightly important/Not important at all*

28 Are there any further aspects related to your experiences at The Hague University of Applied Sciences which influence/influenced your decision whether to stay and work in the Netherlands? Please share your views:

29 Please share your views about what makes/made you want to stay and work in the Netherlands, if your own considerations have not been covered sufficiently:

Many thanks.





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