

Internationalisation in Balance bill: Maastricht University's response to the internet consultation

Maastricht University endorses the extensive response by the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) to the Internationalisation in Balance bill. As we have previously indicated, we are in favour of the three proposed types of caps on student numbers. Equally, we fully support the proposals aimed at familiarising international staff and students with the Dutch language and giving Dutch students the opportunity to use Dutch at an academic level.

Beyond this joint response, we would like to draw attention to the special position of institutions in border regions, as mentioned in both the bill and the explanatory memorandum. With a view to the continuity of Maastricht University and its importance for the region, we call for its special position as an international institution in a border region to be explicitly recognised and further specified in the law. A ministerial policy line, even if it offers the border regions room to manoeuvre, provides insufficient certainty in this respect. The law itself or, at a minimum, a governmental decree would provide adequately for the appropriate range of foreign-language study programmes in border regions. Here we are referring to both existing and new programmes, the latter of which are initiated by the university partly at the request of and in collaboration with diverse societal parties and local and regional authorities. The distinctive international profile of Maastricht University is in this respect an important argument. If the university is prevented from pursuing its international course, the university and the region will be disproportionately affected to such an extent that we fear for the future of the institution and the future prosperity of the region.

Maastricht University currently has 23,000 students and—together with the Maastricht academic hospital—more than 11,000 employees, making it by far the largest employer in the region. But the university is of greater significance than the employment opportunities it offers. It is acknowledged by the regional authorities, the business community and societal parties alike as a source of socioeconomic and intellectual power that is indispensable for the residents of Limburg and the surrounding areas. Its founding in 1976 (and that of the academic medical centre thereafter) can partly be attributed to the closure of the Limburg mines. Approximately 15 years ago the university began, in close collaboration with regional authorities and companies, to foster knowledge-intensive innovation and economic growth through education, research and valorisation activities on the four Brightlands campuses spread across the province. Ever since its founding, therefore, the university has given a sustainable impetus to the socioeconomic reconversion of the province of Limburg.

Characterised by an ageing and shrinking population, the region must respond to the socioeconomic issues of digitisation, circularity and the energy transition while keeping sight of the principles of broad prosperity. Responsibility for this falls to many parties in and outside the region, not least to educators. The purpose of education at large is twofold: to train (or retrain), as efficiently as possible, as many local inhabitants as possible for the labour market of both today and tomorrow; and to tackle shortages and bottlenecks in key sectors by attracting international talent to our location in the heart of Europe while also guiding our own talent abroad. Limburg, with its international orientation, high-quality educational institutions and the Brightlands campuses, on which education and research institutions operate in close proximity to the labour market, is ideally suited to educate talented Dutch students who aspire to an international career as well as foreign

talent who will ultimately seek employment on the (Eu)regional and Dutch labour market. Maastricht University is, along with its partners, increasingly able to retain international graduates in the region.

Limburg traditionally has more international borders than any other province in the country; borders that have often shifted over the centuries. Naturally, this has resulted in social, cultural and economic interconnectedness with the surrounding countries and internationalisation in general. The university thus had an international orientation from its very conception. And thanks to its unique border location, Maastricht University set out on its wholehearted pursuit of an international path in the 20th century.

In recent years, in line with the recommendations of the Veerman Commission (2010) as previously embraced by the government, we have continued to pursue this international path with vigour. As a result, Maastricht University is the most international university in the Netherlands, as reflected in its diverse student and staff population and its internationally—particularly European—oriented research and education portfolio. Our identity is that of the pre-eminent European university in the Netherlands, whereby we play a central role in our Euregion and serve as a bridge between the Netherlands and Europe. Internationalisation has, for decades, also been a core part of our problem-based educational philosophy. Naturally, we set high quality standards in this area, as evidenced by our European quality-assurance certification (CeQuInt, or Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation).

By calling for recognition of the special position of our university, we are not merely preaching to the choir. Regional and local authorities, the regional business community (employers and employees), the government and parliament have repeatedly pointed out that the importance of tailored solutions for Limburg and other border regions is not always recognised from a Randstad perspective. We thus underline the concerns about the impact on institutions in border regions that Zuyd University of Applied Sciences raised in its response to the bill. Tailoring the law would do justice to the proposed line in the report 'Every region counts,' enabling universities (and universities of applied sciences) in border regions to continue to contribute to the Dutch knowledge economy and society.

Yours faithfully,

The Executive Board and deans of Maastricht University