BridgeU

Guide to Universities in The Netherlands

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Dutch Universities: In a Nutshell

- ◊ Strong global ranking
- ◊ Plenty of English-speaking programs
- ◊ Friendly to international students
- ◊ Comparatively easy to gain admittance on top programs
- ◊ Tough to survive with regular exams!
- ◊ A gateway to seeing Europe
- ◊ Lower cost than university education in the USA or UK

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Setting the Scene

Universities in the Netherlands (sometimes referred to as 'Holland') are state-funded and are split into two categories: research universities and universities of applied sciences. There are 14 research universities and 41 universities of applied sciences in the country.

The Netherlands itself offers a unique experience to international students and can be an excellent fit for many potential applicants. Below are a few things to bear in mind as you consider the Netherlands for your university education:

1. The Netherlands is one of the most developed and wealthy nations in the world, with much of the population living in cities, many of them very densely populated.
2. The Netherlands has a number of thriving student cities (think Amsterdam, Maastricht, Delft, Rotterdam, Utrecht, among many others!), which have thriving hubs of cafes and nightlife, while being no more than a bicycle ride (the nation's preferred mode of transport) away from beautiful countryside.
3. The Dutch are known for their directness, which can be misunderstood as rudeness. With time, you'll learn that it comes from a desire for openness and understanding, but it can be an adjustment!
4. Culturally, the Netherlands is known for its tolerant and liberal way of life - it is generally very LGBTQ-friendly and left-leaning on political issues (although there are always exceptions!). The Netherlands is culturally secular, with more than 50% of people defining as having no religious affiliation.
5. With 4 seasons, the Netherlands offers a variety of weather to the newcomer. Frozen canals are ideal for skating in the winter, the spring brings the iconic tulips, warm summers stay light until late and autumn brings beautiful colours and cool, temperate weather.
6. Finally, while many programs are taught in English, and the Dutch are excellent English speakers, you should be prepared to knuckle down and learn Dutch to make the most of your experience.

Why Study in The Netherlands?

Quality & International Recognition

In QS University Rankings, all Dutch universities ranked in the top 350 with eight ranked among the top 150 universities in the world. The top Dutch universities in their list were University of Amsterdam, Delft University of Technology, Leiden University, Utrecht University and University of Groningen, respectively.

Lower Entry Requirements for Top Degrees

Many Dutch universities have very low entry requirements to degrees. However, the first year is treated as a kind of 'probation' year where students are assessed on their ability to survive a large quantity of regular examinations, so low entry requirements definitely don't mean you get an easy ride!

Lower Cost of Study for Top Degrees

Studying in the Netherlands is significantly easier on the wallet compared to the US, UK, Canada and Australia (to name just a few popular examples for international students).

Diverse and Friendly to International Students

Students from all over the world come to the Netherlands to study, so if you're an international student used to being surrounded by diverse cultures, you'll feel at home here.

Safer than US or UK

Compared to the UK and the USA, the Netherlands is safer when it comes to crime (although obviously, that doesn't mean you shouldn't still take precautions!). To illustrate the comparison, even large football crowds are usually family friendly and require few police officers.

Collaborative and Practical Teaching Methods

Dutch universities place a strong emphasis on good personal relations between professors and students. With smaller groups compared to traditional US lectures (15-30 students), most of your coursework will consist of group work, which helps develop skills as well as friendships. The Dutch education system typically places a high emphasis on relevant practical experiences, and universities have a lot of partnerships with Dutch companies, as well as international ones.

Travel Opportunities

The Netherlands has a lot of scenery and culture to offer, but it's also a gateway to Europe. It takes only about an hour to fly from Amsterdam to Paris, Berlin, Brussels, or London, as well as lots of options to get by train to all major European cities.

In short, it's not difficult to see why the Netherlands is becoming one of the most popular destinations for international students from all over the world.

ENGLISH DEGREES

More and more Dutch universities are offering degrees taught in English so do your research and you might be surprised!

Types of Dutch University

Research Universities

Modeled after the Bologna system (and similar to traditional UK universities), these universities offer 3 year undergraduate degrees that are rigorously academic and typically do not include opportunities (or requirements) for work experience during study.

Examples of research universities include:

- Maastricht University
- Erasmus University Rotterdam
- University of Groningen

Universities of Applied Sciences

Undergraduate degrees at universities of applied sciences are typically 4 years in length and will often include a work experience element, or else an exchange/ study abroad opportunity.

Examples of universities of applied sceiences include:

- The Hague University of Applied Sciences
- Rotterdam University, University of Applied Sciences
- Fontys University of Applied Sciences

University Colleges

Some Dutch universities have 'colleges' that offer 3-year undergraduate programs. These are often likened to US liberal arts colleges, offering breadth of study area and enabling students who don't know their area of specialisation to discover it at university. University Colleges have a different application process. This is because they are much smaller and all students are required to live on campus, so there is a space limitation for places.

Examples of university colleges include:

- Amsterdam University College
- University College Tilburg
- University College Roosevelt

The Netherlands also has Institutes for International Education, but these are primarily focused on post-graduate education, so will not be focused on in this guide.

Admissions Process

Deadlines

Applications typically open in September or October for the next year (similar to the British system). Deadlines vary depending on the type of university, but the deadline for most courses is 1st May. There are exceptions to this, however, so it is highly advisable to check directly with the university.

Note: for courses with Numerus Fixus (see next page for details), the deadline is likely to be earlier (i.e. mid January).

University Colleges

Typically, University Colleges require students to apply by the January deadlines, and invite students to interview in February.

StudieLink

After you've done your research and decided which programs you want to apply to, you will need to set up an account on Studielink.

So what is Studielink?

Rather like UCAS for students applying to the UK, Studielink is the Dutch national database for admission to higher education. This system is operated by DUO, which keeps track of all students who are studying in the Netherlands and getting student loans.

Your login to Studielink is required for you to gain admittance, and you'll need to maintain it to update before attending and after your first year (in some cases more regularly) for information your university needs.

Entry Requirements

- Your high school diploma (i.e. A Level, GPA, IB). The level will vary by university.
- Some programs (i.e. in the art) set their own extra requirements.
- If applying to an English program, you'll need IELTS 6 / TOEFL 550 to prove your fluency.
- In Studielink, you will upload your transcripts, personal statement /motivation letter/ CV.

Top tip: If you know which diploma the institution of your choice has set as a minimum requirement, you should check how your diploma compares to this on the actual Nuffic website (https://www.nuffic.nl/) which is the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education.

Preparatory Year

You might get a conditional offer at your university of choice, with a requirement for a preparatory year. Dutch immigration law allows you to come to the Netherlands for one year just before your studies if you receive this offer. After you've passed the exams at the end of the preparatory year, your 'conditional' offer is transformed into a letter of acceptance.

‘Numerus Fixus’ (AKA limited spots!)

What does Numerus Fixus mean?

Literally, it means fixed number (from the Latin), and it relates to there being a limited number of spots available on a given course or program, so not everyone who applies will get in.

Does it apply to all courses in Dutch universities?

No. Numerus Fixus is in place for courses that are extremely popular. It’s there to help everyone by ensuring all applicants have a fair and equal chance of being selected.

What subjects typically have Numerus Fixus applied to them?

Most of the courses taught in English are not subject to Numerus Fixus. The exceptions include medicine, psychology, international business administration, economics and physiotherapy. Numerus Fixus on English-taught courses is likely to increase, so always contact the university to check.

How does Numerus Fixus work?

In 2018, some major changes were made to how Numerus Fixus operates. In the past, places on popular courses were sometimes allocated by a lottery controlled centrally by the Dutch government. This is no longer the case, meaning that wherever there is a restriction on the number of places, universities are now free to select the students they want.

Can I get into Numerus Fixus courses with low/ moderate grades?

Whereas it used to be possible to get a place on restricted subjects with relatively modest grades at high school, this is no longer going to be the case as universities are likely to use academics to select students.

What if my grades aren’t high enough for Numerus Fixus courses?

Don’t worry! The Netherlands has a large number of non-selective Bachelor’s degrees which still constitute the vast majority of English-taught program at Dutch universities.

Finding Your Best Fit University

Environment & Setting

Where you choose to go to university will have a huge impact on student life, your experience there and whether it's the right fit for you. Some examples of this for you to consider include:

Physical Setting

The area you spend the next 3-4 years in is worth very careful consideration! Do you like nature walks, bustling cities, easy access to transport links? If you can't visit the city or campus you're considering, then think about what you enjoy and do your research.

Residential options

University Colleges provide student housing, and most campuses will provide residential options for international students. This means you'll meet other international students easily and be able to get to know the country (and city) together! Residential options and prices vary from university to university, so do your research before making any assumptions.

Living costs

For a small country, you may be surprised how much prices vary across the Netherlands. By far the most expensive city to live in is Amsterdam, and typically smaller student cities tend to be cheaper in terms of living costs (rent, food and entertainment). To give you an idea of the typical cost of living in the Netherlands.

Milk (1 litre) - US$1.20
Rice (1 kg) - US$2.50
Mobile phone - US$0.25/minute (local mobile to mobile typical rate)
Internet - US$40/ month
Cappuccino - US$3.50
Transport on trams/metro/buses for 1 hour - US$3.50

Travel & Transport

Some student cities are ideal if you want to hop around Europe or easily pop home for the weekend, while others are less well connected. This can mean that it takes a lot longer, or is a lot more expensive to travel from, so take that into consideration if easy access to travel is important.

Smaller Historical Student Cities

Leiden is a small city, close to both The Hague and Amsterdam, full of beautiful canals. With a 'homey' vibe, the student community is more tight-knit compared to Amsterdam, but it's still big enough to have plenty to do. Leiden is known for its active student associations.

Delft is a small city located between the Hague and Rotterdam. It looks like a step back in time with its traditional canals, Dutch houses and cobbled streets and a rich history - rather like Amsterdam but without the bustle of a huge international city (and without the tourists!). Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) is particularly known for mathematics, computer science and technology, as well a top option for aspiring architects. Considering how small Delft itself is, the campus is large and home to a lot of international students.

Groningen is located in northern Netherlands and has a large student population. It is diverse in its community and has a lot of different activities (including nightlife) on offer. The university is the second oldest in the country and considered extremely beautiful. The university is known for its female success: first female lecturer and first female student. Overall, it's a bustling student city with lots going on.

Maastricht borders Germany and Belgium, so it's a good launchpad for exploring Europe. It's a beautiful and very diverse city. Unlike the rest of the Netherlands, Maastricht and the surrounding region is more hilly, so if you enjoy a hike or a varied skyline, it could be the place for you. Maastricht university is a more modern option compared to some of the older, more established institutions in the Netherlands, but it's very popular with international students. You can be sure if you go here, you will be amongst a diverse group of people from all over the world.

Larger Historical Student Cities

Amsterdam , the capital, is known for its picture postcard canals, its museums and thriving culture. With the country's largest university (University of Amsterdam), it's an obvious choice for many international students. It's more expensive than other parts of the Netherlands, but if you can afford it, it has a lot of culture and history, not to mention nightlife and beautiful scenery to sink your teeth into.

The Hague is a large, sprawling city close to Rotterdam, Leiden and Amsterdam, and home to the royal family, government buidlings, the courts and embassies (which you might expect to typically find in the capital city). The Hague (also known as Den Haag) is known as a multicultural city with a rich history and culture - and it even has a beach nearby!

Utrecht is another traditional beautiful Dutch city, filled with iconic canals and architecture. Utrecht has a great cafe and restaurant culture with a chilled out vibe during the day, as well as an active nightlife. Its location bang in the middle of the Netherlands makes it easy and pretty quick to travel from. Utrecht University is one of the oldest universities in Europe (1600s) as well as being one of the largest universities in the Netherlands, so student life is a big part of living in Utrecht.

Modern Student Cities

Rotterdam Rotterdam, the second biggest city in the Netherlands after Amsterdam, is also bustling with people from many different nationalities and has a large student community (as well as a thriving electronic music scene!). It is particularly popular with modern architecture lovers because after World War II, Rotterdam was completely rebuilt from scratch using contemporary design. Erasmus University Rotterdam is particularly known for its business school.

Eindhoven is known for innovation, technology and engineering. Eindhoven University of Technology, which ranks highly amongst the world's universities for architecture, works closely with Philips (a home-grown brand) and other local tech companies. Eindhoven has plenty to offer in terms of nightlife and activities. Its airport often has cheaper tickets than Schiphol (Amsterdam's main airport), so you may find it easier and cheaper to get home if you live overseas.

Tilburg is located between Rotterdam and Eindhoven and is a city with plenty going on, particularly summer festivals. Tilburg is making a name for itself as a hub for innovation and start-ups within the Netherlands. The university's links to these industries can enable students to step straight into exciting jobs after completing their degree. The university is known for Economics, Law, Social and Behavioral Sciences and Humanities.

Mythbusting Dutch Universities

MYTH: Dutch Universities are the 'Easy' Option

With lower grade requirements compared to similarly ranked universities in the UK and US, this is an easy myth to believe, but don't fall for it! Just because it's easier to get an offer at a university in the Netherlands, it doesn't mean that you'll be less challenged. In fact, students with lower grades can find the pressures of regular examinations difficult to stay on top of.

MYTH: Dutch Universities Are Pretty Much All the Same

Although the Netherlands has fewer universities compared to the US, UK or Canada, that doesn't mean that there's less variety in the type of experience you can have. The personality, subject specialization and environment of each university is different. You can have some students studying in the Netherlands who live in a college, studying a wide range of subjects and gaining a liberal arts education amongst a small group of close-knit peers, while another student at a Dutch university may be in a huge campus studying a vocational subject such as architecture with strong links to local industry. Pretty different, right?

MYTH: You Need To Speak At Least Some Dutch

There are many (and increasing!) courses offered fully taught in English, so you don't need to demonstrate (or have!) any Dutch in order to apply to or succeed on the course. However, you would need to demonstrate fluency in Dutch to apply to a Dutch-taught course (obviously!).

This isn't to say you shouldn't learn Dutch - you absolutely should while you're there - it'll help you make friends and feel connected to the community, but you can go there without even knowing how to say 'dank je' (although we recommend you at least learn that!).

MYTH: The Netherlands is Expensive

It's a wealthy, hi-tech country, but that doesn't mean that it's expensive for students. Comparatively (to its most popular competitor countries for university), it's one of the cheapest, even for international students. This is primarily because tuition fees are so much lower than the US, UK, Canada and Australia.

You may have heard other things about the Netherlands, and some of it is probably true, but check your sources and ask your counselor if you're not sure!

Your University Visit Checklist

Before You Visit / Kicking Off Your Research

- Talk to alumni from your school who have attended the university you're thinking about applying to, or who have applied to university in the Netherlands to get some insight from them.
- Read blogs and discussion forums to get insight into what it's like to study at the university.
- Read about the university and be fully prepared with questions when you go to visit.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE ON THE CAMPUS TOUR

- Sit in on a class to get a feel for the type of teaching and the learning environment.
- Talk to students and ask about their social and academic experience of the university. Probe areas you're interested in, such as extra-curriculars, support services or learning environment.
- Talk to academic staff members and ask them about what type of student thrives at the university - you'll get an interesting perspective from them. Try to speak to a member from the department (i.e.: engineering/ music) you are applying to.
- Walk around and 'use' the campus - go and sit on the lawn, go eat in the caffeteria and see if you can visit the accomodation. Try to imagine yourself living there!
- Go to see facilities that are important to you - it might be a laboratory, sports facility, art studio etc.
- Go exploring the town/city! Make sure you can imagine yourself living there.

VIRTUAL TOURS!

If you can't go to the Netherlands to visit universities before you apply, don't panic! There are virtual campus tours that you can access online that give you lots of information about the facilities and feel.

Example Questions to Ask Current Students

- How would you describe this university in 3 words? What makes it different from others that are in the same area/ similar on the surface?
- Why did you choose this university? Has it lived up to it?
- What do you do for fun/ on the weekends?
- What is the international student community like?
- How easy is it to travel to and from the campus?
- What is the social life like?
- What student support is there?
- What is the typical cost of living in this city?

Don't Ask about anything you can look up. Use your precious campus tour time to get information you *can't* get on the website. Examples of questions you don't need to ask during a tour are:

- Tuition fees
- Acceptance rate
- Number of students

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