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Advising Prospective Students
Matching at Maastricht University’s Bachelor in European Studies

Patrick Bijsmans & Pia Harbers*

Abstract

Informing prospective students about their study choice is a challenge for many programmes in higher education. Since 2011 Maastricht University’s Bachelor in European Studies is using a procedure called ‘Matching’. Matching consists of a questionnaire and an advisory procedure, which may include an intake interview. The goal is to ensure that prospective students’ expectations match with the programme’s content and its teaching philosophy and her competences potentially enable her to fulfil the programme’s requirements. It is a tool to steer size and quality of incoming cohorts, but also a service to students: by identifying potential problems at an earlier stage we are able to offer students the necessary advice and support. In this paper we will present data that suggests that the impression a student makes through the questionnaire (and, when applicable, the interview) makes it possible to provide more accurate advice regarding a student’s study choice. In addition, it enables us to address potential challenges at an early stage. Yet, Matching is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution and challenges remain.

Keywords: Matching, study choice, study advice, study success, retention rates.

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Introduction

A mismatch between students’ expectations and the reality of their experience at university, frequently linked to limited attempts to familiarise oneself with the study programme, often leads to an early withdrawal from the chosen undergraduate programme (e.g. Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Wilkins & Meeran, 2011; Zijlstra, 2011). Programmes in higher education are continuously trying to tackle the challenge of how to assist prospective students in making the right study choice. This is not just a service to the students, but should also help increase retention and completion rates, issues that are on the agenda of many national governments.

Along with conventional tools and activities, such as websites, open days and study fairs, new activities have attracted the attention of many professionals in higher education, including rankings and dedicated study choice websites. Yet, this is not an easy challenge to overcome as higher education study choice is determined by several factors, including perceptions of a programme’s content and job perspectives, and of city and institution, influence by friends and family, perceptions of own strengths and weaknesses, and several social variables (e.g. Kemper, Van Hoof, Visser & De Jong, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2004).

Developed under the heading of ‘Matching’, most undergraduate programmes in the Netherlands are currently in the process of introducing intake questionnaires, test exams, and so on. Maastricht University’s Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES) has already been using a Matching procedure (consisting of an intake questionnaire and an advisory procedure) since 2011. The goal of this procedure is to ensure that prospective students’ expectations match with the programme’s content, its teaching philosophy and the required skills. The procedure is devised in such a way as to first and foremost have prospective students reflect on their own study choice. Matching is a tool to steer size and quality of incoming cohorts, but also a service to students: by identifying potential problems at an earlier stage we are able to offer students the necessary advice and support.

This paper will discuss the BA ES’ experience with Matching and our initial attempts to gain a better insight into predicting study success. After a short introduction to the bachelor, the paper will present how Matching was developed and how it works in practice. At the time of writing, the first cohort is only half way through their last year and therefore this paper focusses on the influence of Matching on students’ study success in the first year of
their undergraduate studies. In fact, as Trotter and Roberts (2006, p.372) explain, the first year is “the most critical in shaping persistence decisions and plays a formative role in influencing student attitudes and approaches to learning.” (see also, for instance: Bruinsma & Jansen, 2009). The focus is on the first three cohorts that had to take part in the procedure (2011/2012, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014). Due to the heterogeneity of these cohorts, this study pays particular attention to individual variables and their predictive value, rather than the relation between those variables.

The paper argues that, based on a questionnaire (and, when applicable, an intake interview), it is possible to provide more accurate advice regarding a student’s study choice. In addition, it enables us to address potential challenges at an early stage. Nevertheless, the impact on retention rates has proven limited. This paper will also illustrate how insights and approach have gradually changed based on the ongoing learning process that Matching entails. It will be argued that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution in terms of how to implement Matching elsewhere, but there are a few important lessons that may apply across undergraduate programmes.

**Maastricht’s Bachelor in European Studies**

Following the ongoing process of European integration, the past couple of decades have seen the establishment of several Europe-related programmes in higher education. Some of these particularly focus on the European Union (EU), but others have opted for a broader focus on developments in Europe (e.g. Rumford, 2009). Maastricht University’s BA ES falls in the latter category. It is a generalist programme for students with an interest in the cultural, historical, political and social aspects of Europe. A combination of five key characteristics defines the BA ES.

The first three characteristics concern the content of the programme. For one, Maastricht’s BA ES has an interdisciplinary nature. This is reflected not only in the offered courses, but also in the fact that they are taught by staff from various departments, ranging from Arts & Literature to Political Science. The second characteristic is the programme’s focus on Europe in its widest sense. Students do not just get to learn about the integration

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1 However, data gathered shows that a majority of these students is on track to complete their studies within three years.
process and EU governance, but also about important other aspects of Europe, such as cultural and religious fault lines, European history, and international affairs. The third characteristic is that the programme combines these diverse disciplines and perspectives in a coherent curriculum. The three years are organised around specific themes, respectively ‘European Diversity’, ‘European Unity’ and ‘Europe in the World’.

Two further characteristics concern the way in which teaching and learning takes shape. Importantly, the BA ES builds on Problem-Based Learning (PBL), a student centred approach to learning and teaching that uses problems as the starting point of the learning process. Supported by a tutor, students are responsible for shaping the learning process in groups of maximum 15. They are expected to actively take part in discussions, presenting their own ideas and discussing them with fellow students. In addition, contact hours are limited to approximately 10 hours per week, meaning that there is a lot of emphasis on self-study (e.g. Maurer & Neuhold, 2014). The final characteristic of the BA ES is that it is fully taught in English. Students are expected to already have a rather high level of English when they start, even though they will still have to take an English language diagnostic test and two trainings in academic English. These are scheduled during the first for months of their studies, but are explicitly geared towards training academic English.

The BA ES is a relatively young programme that welcomed its first cohort in 2002. Ever since, the yearly intake of new students has increased, with about 370 new students starting their studies during the last couple of years. They represent over 30 different nationalities, mostly European. Like many bachelor programmes, the geographic location of Maastricht University plays a role, meaning that it attracts many students from the region (see, also: Bloemen & Dellaert, 2000; Briggs, 2006). This region largely coincides with the Euregion Maas-Rhine, meaning that Belgian and especially German students represent significant groups within the BA ES. Yet, the number of students from southern and eastern Europe, as well as from the UK, is on the increase, resulting in increasingly heterogeneous cohorts.

The BA ES does not select upon application. Instead, selection is done at the end of the first year, when students need to have passed at least 42 out of 60 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) to be able to continue their studies. This is the so-called ‘Binding Study Advice’ (BSA). Students who fail to meet this criterion will receive a negative Binding Study

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2 Active learning itself is important to achieve higher retention rates (e.g. Trotter & Roberts, 2006, p. 381).
Advice (n-BSA) that leads to exclusion from the programme. Students receive a (p-BSA) Binding Study Advice if they have met this requirement.

It became increasingly clear that the increase of student numbers presented important challenges for the BA ES. On the one hand, this concerned practical challenges, ranging from a limited availability of suitable teaching rooms (to allow for PBL’s small-scale set-up) to increasing pressure on staff members. On the other hand, the increased reputation of the BA ES meant that more students applied for reasons related to this, without paying sufficient attention to programme content, required skills, et cetera.

In other words, students’ expectations about the BA ES and/or their academic potential did not always match with what we have to offer and what is expected from students, even when based on their prior education they are admissible to our programme. For instance, the English language proficiency of most incoming students is sufficient. Yet, a growing group was struggling up to a point where they were unable to pass courses, as has also been experienced by other programmes in higher education that are fully taught in English (e.g. Maiworm & Wächter, 2002; Murray, 2013). The challenge of attracting the ‘right’ students coincided with growing government pressure to increase retention and completion rates, which resulted in fixed agreements between the government and individual universities. This was linked to discourses about ‘excellence in higher education’, but also to decreasing government budgets and funding for universities.

Matching

The BA ES’ sister programme Arts and Culture at the same Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) was struggling with similar problems and in early 2010 its programme director suggested consulting with colleagues from the University of Amsterdam’s Bachelor in Media and Culture, which already applied an early form of Matching. Because selection upon application was not seen as a viable option due to strict government regulations, Matching was immediately seen as a promising way to get to grips with student intake, both in terms of size and quality.

Preparations for Matching started at the end of 2010. The 2011/2012 cohort was the first to have to take part in this obligatory procedure. Colleagues from the University of Amsterdam provided valuable insights and feedback. Students and staff of the BA ES tested
the questionnaire and provided feedback on the individual questions. A native speaker checked the questionnaire for potential language issues. Each year, once the respective cohort has completed the Matching process, basic data about the outcomes is gathered and students are asked to evaluate the process. This input, combined with existing research on issues such as study choice, retention and attrition rates, and first-year experience, is then used to further improve the process. In addition, the data we gather can also be used during the actual process, for instance to explain why we invite prospective students in general and, when needed, to explain why the candidate in question was invited.

**Procedure and questionnaire**

Students that participate in the Matching procedure are formally admissible to the BA ES and have already registered for the programme. We assume that they have informed themselves about the programme through Open Days\(^3\), websites, and other means. Matching is not meant to replace such initial information activities, but has been designed as a tool to assist students in making an appropriate study choice by having them investigate the basis of their decision to sign up (cf. Kmett, Arkes & Jones, 1999). Sections in the questionnaire are preceded by a short rationale and sometimes encourage students to have a look at the information available on our website.

From the student perspective, Matching starts as soon as they have received an invitation to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire contains different sets of questions that were drafted taking into account the programme’s characteristic as described above. A first set contains questions about the student’s personal background (age, birthplace, country of residence, et cetera). These questions are followed by questions about prior education (secondary and higher education, if applicable) and work experience (including acquired skills and their usefulness in terms of the intended studies). Next, students are asked about their study choice, motivation, expectations and study skills, as well as future plans.

The questionnaire intends to make students reflect on their study choice and to have

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\(^3\) Open Days are meant to inform high school students about the programme and take place twice a year, in November and in March. The university also organises so-called ‘Experience Days’, during which students can get a taste of PBL and the topics discussed throughout the programme.
them make up their own mind as regards to whether or not the BA ES is the right study choice for them. Completed questionnaires are screened by the programme director, the student adviser or another member of the team. Due to technical limitations, attempts to automate part of this process have so far proven unsuccessful. However, we have also come to the conclusion that a more personal approach is usually more effective, as has also been suggested by other research (e.g. Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012).

Based on the reading of a completed questionnaire, the prospective student receives a status, either ‘OK’, ‘Pending’ or ‘NOK’. In this respect it is important to stress that Matching is not aimed at selecting individuals with the best possible fit, but at attracting applicants that can develop into successful students. The OK status is given when it is believed that a student’s expectations match with what the programme has on offer and her competences potentially enable her to fulfil the programme’s requirements. The student receives an email outlining as much, welcoming her to the programme and inviting her to the introduction days. Students who receive the status ‘Pending’ receive the same email, plus also a specific advice. The latter tends to refer to a potential challenge, which could concern, for instance, English proficiency or time investment and time management skills, but may also refer to the content of the programme.

The interview

The status NOK usually implies that the questionnaire brought up more than one potentially problematic issue. Students who are put on NOK receive an invitation to an (compulsory) intake interview in Maastricht. In special cases, we do offer the opportunity for a skype-interview, yet most prospective students actually come to Maastricht. The interview lasts approximately 20 minutes. Interviews are always approached in a friendly and relatively relaxed way.

There are usually two interviewers. During the first two years the interviews were done by the programme director and the student adviser, who were both closely involved with the development of Matching. This way two perspectives were brought in: on the one hand, programme content and expectations; on the other hand, student skills and motivation. Since 2013 either the programme director or the student adviser conducts the interview, together with another member of the academic staff. This is done to build on and
further develop a more or less standardised procedure, while at the same time engaging more staff members in Matching.

The actual interview also aims at self-reflection on part of the students and follows the set-up as listed in table 1. After the interview is over, the student will receive one final email, thanking her for coming. If needed, it will contain (or repeat) a piece of advice. In the first year of Matching, the student's status would remain on NOK, but since 2012/2013 a student's status will be changed to either ‘OK after interview’ or ‘NOK after interview’. The first leads to an email that invites the student to the introduction days and may still contain some piece of advice. The second leads to an email in which the student is advised to reconsider her study choice, including the request to deregister.

Table 1: Set-up intake interviews

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Programme director (or student adviser) welcomes student and thanks student for coming to Maastricht. Provides Matching background and stresses the importance of the advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>First question to student: ‘do you have any idea why, based on your questionnaire, we have invited you for an interview?’. This question already provides an insight into the student’s ability to reflect on herself. The invitation to the interview, in fact, does not specifically explain why a student is invited, but generally refers to a potential mismatch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Next the relevant issues identified in the questionnaire are discussed. No particular order is being followed, as questions may sometimes lead to other questions or students present new information. The questions are meant to facilitate dialogue and to get a better insight into a student’s background, skills, motivation and expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>After these questions, the student gets a chance to ask questions she may still have. Sometimes students ask questions that confirm our impression that she does – or does not – have a good insight into the BA ES. In other words, this is not just an opportunity for students, but it may actually be relevant in terms of formulating advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Student gets one last question, again aimed at self-reflection: ‘what will you take away with you from this interview?’. It is hoped that the student can formulate the conclusion herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>To conclude, the student receives advice, although in some cases this is not done immediately due to need to further reflect on the interview.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The presentation of our findings focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, we will compare the Matching statuses given to students who have actually started the programme with their
study progress results – Grade Point Average (GPA) and acquired ECTS, in particular; on the other hand, we will look at the predictive value of individual variables, especially with respect to study choice, skills and prior education. We will not focus on the correlation between those variables for this particular study. This is due to the fact that our cohorts are very heterogeneous in terms of the different nationalities of our students, which, for instance, means that it is extremely difficult to compare grades at secondary school.\(^4\)

As regards the predictive value of individual variables, we will pay particular attention to variables that we possibly can influence. Variables such as gender have been found by other studies to influence study success (e.g. McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Van der Hulst & Jansen, 2002) and our female students do indeed tend to outperform our male students. Yet, such variables will not be discussed here because we cannot influence them.

The data was originally gathered to improve Matching. As a result, the questionnaire has been changed each year. Yet, despite not all variables being kept constant, the data described below illustrates that the key findings return each year. For instance, some of the main (non-) predictive variables are confirmed each year. As such, the findings are still interesting for other researchers and programmes considering solutions such as Matching.

**Matching process and Matching study results**

Table 2 presents an overview of the number of applicants, the number of completed questionnaires and the status given to the student after having read the questionnaire (but before the actual interview), as well as the number of students that actually started their studies in the respective academic years. Two tentative conclusions can be drawn from this table. The first concerns the aim of stabilising the size of our cohorts, despite the increasing number of applicants, which appears to have been met. The second cautious conclusion concerns our aim to stimulate self-reflection and self-selection. The table also shows that approximately half (or even more in 2013/2014) of the applicants do not complete the Matching procedure, many of which did not even complete the questionnaire.

The table also shows that we have been inviting more students for an interview (the NOK group). This was the result of a learning-by-doing process, as well the data gathered.

\(^4\) In fact, even within one country we encounter different grading scales, such as is the case in Germany.
Only few students withdraw their application after the interview, even when having been advised to reconsider their study choice. While we have done no specific research into this matter, we suspect that many applicants decide to stay due to the personal approach taken throughout the process. They have already developed an affiliation with the BA ES, through Matching in general, but also due to the interview in particular, which many students report as being pleasant. In fact, research on recruitment, admission and induction of new students and on first-year experience in more general terms often stresses the importance of a personal approach in which (potential) students are treated as individuals (e.g. Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

Table 2: Matching status before interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011/2012</th>
<th>2012/2013</th>
<th>2013/2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>479 (70.44%)</td>
<td>493 (71.04%)</td>
<td>539 (62.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake OK</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake PENDING</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake NOK</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started</td>
<td>379 (55.74%)</td>
<td>366 (52.74%)</td>
<td>361 (41.93%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When students have started their studies, there are many other factors that have an influence, including external factors beyond the control of university (e.g. Bennett, 2003; Leveson, McNeil & Joiner, 2013). Even so, as shown in table 3, the comparison of Matching data with study result suggests that the impression a student makes through the questionnaire (and, when applicable, the interview) provides a good indication of their chances of successfully studying the BA ES.

The collected data for 2011/2012 shows that, with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 6.69\(^5\) and a total number 48.65 ECTS\(^6\), the students that received the OK status on average scored much better than the two other groups. That does not mean that all students in the OK group eventually obtained 42 or more credits. In fact, 39 out of these 203 students received an n-BSA. In other words, while predictions were quite accurate, they were not flawless. The Pending students score better than the NOK students, despite the fact that both average GPA and ECTS are below passing figures. Standard deviations are higher, though, suggesting that the Pending and NOK groups were more diverse.

\(^{5}\) On a 1-10 grading scale, where a 10 is the highest possible grade and a 6 a passing grade.

\(^{6}\) Remember that students need to obtain a minimum of 42 ECTS to be able to continue into the second year.
The latter was one of the reasons to introduce the ‘OK after interview’ and ‘NOK after interview’ categories as of 2012/2013. We assumed that this would provide a more accurate picture of the performance of the group that was invited for an interview. Again, the OK students have outperformed the other groups, but we also see that the OK after interview group outperforms the NOK after interview group. In other words, the introduction of the new statuses indeed seems to lead to a more accurate picture. What remains, however, are (slightly) higher standard deviations for the students that attended an intake interview. As concerns the Intake Pending group, these students had a similar GPA as those who are in the OK after interview groups, but the latter acquire more credits.

At the time of writing (May 2014) the 2013/2014 cohort is still in their first year, but based on data collected after 2 out of 5 periods we can already conclude that the OK group again outperforms the other groups. Also, the NOK after interview group again achieves the lowest GPA and number of credits. There is, however, a marked difference between the Pending and OK after interview groups, with, compared to last year’s results, the latter currently doing less well than the Pending group. Comparing the BSA status of the students in May confirms this initial finding, with 50% of the Pending group already having already

### Table 3: Matching outcome versus study results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average GPA (SD)</th>
<th>Average ECTS (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2011/2012</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake OK</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>6.69 (1.50)</td>
<td>48.65 (18.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake PENDING</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5.81 (1.74)</td>
<td>41.53 (22.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake NOK</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>5.36 (2.10)</td>
<td>35.03 (23.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.87 (3.10)</td>
<td>29.00 (28.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-test</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F=15,269; p=0.000</td>
<td>F=10,999; p=0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2012/2013</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake OK</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>6.62 (1.67)</td>
<td>48.11 (18.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK after interview</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>6.23 (1.74)</td>
<td>46.05 (19.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake PENDING</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>6.23 (1.63)</td>
<td>44.27 (19.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOK after interview</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>5.51 (1.81)</td>
<td>37.74 (21.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-test</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F=5,791; p=0.001</td>
<td>F=3,954; p=0.009</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2013/2014</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake OK</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>6.53 (1.74)</td>
<td>19.29 (6.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK after interview</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>5.97 (1.66)</td>
<td>16.80 (7.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake PENDING</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.36 (1.99)</td>
<td>18.70 (7.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOK after interview</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4.77 (2.23)</td>
<td>11.90 (9.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-test</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F=15,235; p=0.000</td>
<td>F=13,302; p=0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Results at the end of year 1
** Results after 2 out of 5 course periods
received a p-BSA\textsuperscript{7} as compared to just 28.87\% of the OK after interview group. Of the OK group also 50\% has received a p-BSA; this only applies to 16.91\% of the NOK after interview students.

Finally, one of the aims of Matching has so far turned out to be more challenging than expected. The retention rates of both the 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 cohorts did not substantially increase, as was originally intended. This may not come as a surprise, based on the findings of other studies (e.g. Bennett, 2003; Verbeek, Van Eck and Glaudé, 2011). However, one interesting observation can be made, and this concerns the finding that relatively few students drop out despite having received a p-BSA: 0\% of 2011/2012 and 2\% of the 2012/2013 cohorts, as compared to more than 10\% of the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 pre-Matching cohorts. This seems to imply that the students that eventually started the programme were those that were really convinced of their study choice.

Study choice

As mentioned earlier, wrong expectations often influence a student’s chances of study success. This mismatch is frequently linked to limited attempts to familiarise oneself with the study programme. Our data shows that students who have only informed themselves through the website underperform compared to students who have informed themselves through a wider variety of channels. At the same time, as an individual variable whether or not a student visited an Open Day is not predictive for study success. This finding surprises us. We often notice, both in questionnaires and during interviews, that students who did not attend an Open Day, tend to lack certain knowledge about for instance the content of the B A ES and of PBL. In fact, other research often remarks on the importance of attending Open Days for study choice (e.g. Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

Students regularly mention that they expect Open Days to be PR events, rather than being helpful in terms of their personal need for information (cf. Briggs, 2007, p.719). Based on their feedback, we have revised the Open Days, which now include not only talks for prospective students, but also for their parents. In addition, the focus is not just on what can be expected from the programme, but also on what the programme expects from its

\textsuperscript{7}At the time of writing, almost 50\% of the students that are still enrolled still can either receive a p-BSA or a n-BSA at the end of the year due to the fact that some exams and re-examinations still have to take place.
students. Consequently, prospective students (and their parents) ask important study-related questions at an earlier stage, namely during Open Days. Additionally, the BA ES website has been upgraded, with, for instance, more information about PBL and a clearer student profile.\(^8\)

Other variables that turned out not to be predictive include whether or not the BA ES is a student’s first choice and whether or not a student has simultaneously signed up for another programme in higher education. This also becomes clear during interviews. Students that have answered that the BA ES is not their first choice often remark that this is due to the fact that they were originally interested in, for instance, an International Relations programme, yet after informing themselves about a variety of possible programmes the BA ES turned out to be their preferred choice. They also regularly indicate that they have signed for another programme as a back-up in case of a negative outcome of the Matching procedure.

Finally, we also ask students whether or not they have a dream job or a more precise career orientation. The literature is not conclusive on whether or not this influences study success (e.g. McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001, pp.23, 27) and we are also unable to determine whether or not this variable is predictive.

**Skills**

Studies have shown that skills do play a role in terms of student retention, even though it may not be the most important factor. For instance, Jansen and Suhre (2010) have found that skills are important for being able to cope with stress and for academic achievements. This, they argue, is especially the case for time management and learning skills (see, also: Bennett, 2003, p.138). In more general terms, Yorke and Longden (2004, p.114) remark that students who drop out often refer to lacking certain study skills. It is on these type of issues that we can provide students with advice.

Our prospective students have to look at statements concerned with studying in a PBL environment (e.g. time management, group work, discussing), as well as with general

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\(^8\) See: [http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Faculties/FASoS/TargetGroups/ProspectiveStudents/BachelorsProgrammes/EuropeanStudies2.htm](http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Faculties/FASoS/TargetGroups/ProspectiveStudents/BachelorsProgrammes/EuropeanStudies2.htm) (last accessed 19 June 2014).
academic skills, reading and writing in particular. The lower their self-reported score on these items, the lower the number of acquired ECTS and GPA (cf. McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001, p. 22).\(^9\) In extreme cases prospective students are advised to reconsider their study choice since a PBL learning environment may simply not be for them – research suggests that a fit with the learning environment is imperative for a student’s chances of success (e.g. Zijlstra, 2011, pp.174-177). Yet, most students whose self-reported study skills scores are lower receive particular advice on one or more of these matters. For instance, students who indicate that they are not good at time management are strongly advised to take a study efficacy course at the UM Student Service Centre. In some cases this is all the more important because students indicate that they plan to work for a substantial amount of hours or need to travel to Maastricht for classes, which may potentially lead to challenges (e.g. Levesona, McNeil & Joiner, 2013).

To allow us to get a better insight into prospective students’ acquired skills we introduced questions on work experience in the questionnaire for the 2013/2014 cohort. The first of these concerns the question whether or not students have had work experience (summer job, voluntary work, etc.). If yes, students are asked to explain a) which work experience, b) which skills they acquired and c) how they think they can use these skills during their studies. These questions again aim at having students reflect on their study choice. They also help to put the self-reported skills scores in perspective. For instance, prospective students may not be invited for an interview when they agree partly on time management and working alone, yet their work experience shows that they already have experience dealing with such challenges.

Interestingly enough, whether or not students have already acquired working experience appears not to be predictive. What did turn out to be predictive is the length of the answers to the open questions on working experience. In fact, our data indicate that the longer the answers to all open questions in the questionnaire taken together, the better the students perform.\(^10\) This has so far been the case during all years of Matching. Writing is an important component of many programme in social sciences and the humanities and this is also the case for the BA ES. In other words, eloquent writing skills and even a degree of

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\(^9\) Students have to choose one out of four possible answers: disagree fully, disagree partly, agree partly and agree fully.

\(^{10}\) For instance, for the 2013/2014 cohort after two periods 0.319 (GPA) and 0.302 (ECTS), in both case p<0.001.
pleasure in writing are important and the length of the answers to the open questions in the questionnaire seems to confirm this. This is an issue that we actively discuss with the students who have to attend an intake interview.\textsuperscript{11}

The shorter answers are often combined with a poorer English proficiency level. Based on this, one of the recent and most visible innovations in terms of programme content concerns the introduction of a diagnostic English language test, which has been developed together with the UM language centre. In the first two weeks of the programme new students have to take a multiple-choice exam that tests their English proficiency level. The lowest scoring 20\% have to summarise a text and will also have to attend an interview with one of the language trainers. Based on the interview, the summary and the answers to the test, students receive tailor-made advice regarding their English language proficiency.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Prior education}

In terms of prior education, there are a few things worth mentioning. The first is the predictability of secondary school grades. Previous studies suggest that the higher the average grade at the end of secondary school, the better the chances of study success (for discussions, see, for instance: Annema & Ooijevaar, 2011; Bruinsma & Jansen, 2009; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). However, as reflected in Table 4 our research presents a less straightforward picture, which can partly be explained by the heterogeneity of the cohorts.

For some nationalities no reliable data was available, either because the groups were too small or because no detailed data on grading scales was available. The latter is related to the fact that, currently, we only ask for detailed grades from prospective students with nationalities that traditionally represent substantial amounts of students in our BA. More importantly, comparing grades always turns out to be difficult, for instance due to different grading scales, different high school subjects and sometimes even different routes to university.

\textsuperscript{11} We have observed that shorter answers are regularly combined with students indicating that the first-year course ‘Research and Writing’ is the one that appeals least to them. In addition, their answer to the skills-related statement ‘I enjoy writing’ tends to be either agree partly or even disagree partly.

\textsuperscript{12} Interestingly enough, many of the students who belong to the lowest scoring 20\% have previously been warned about the level of their English.
Table 4: the predictive value of secondary education grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011/2012</th>
<th>2012/2013</th>
<th>2013/2014**</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average grade secondary education (German students)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final grade English (German students)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average grade secondary education (Belgian students)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final grade English (Belgian students)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average grade secondary education (Dutch students)</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final grade English (Dutch students)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average grade secondary education (British students)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous enrolment in higher education</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>VWO vs. other diploma (Netherlands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = not-predictive, P = predictive

*Analysis suggests significance, but one or more subgroups have only limited N.

** Results after two of five course periods.

For German students the final grade for English at high school was not predictive for the first Matching cohort, but it turned out to be predictive for the other two. At the same time, their average was predictive each year. Dutch students’ final grades for English was predictive for the cohorts 2011/2012 and 2013/2014, but not for the cohort 2012/2013. The final grade in English of Belgian students represents another good example of how difficult it is to determine the value of grades. For 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 we are unable to conclude whether or not grades for English were predictive for Belgian students, despite the group of students being large enough to draw conclusions from. More interestingly, in for 2013/2014 their grade for English is not predictive at all. We believe that these ambiguities can partly be explained by the fact that especially many of our French speaking Belgian students tend to explain that English was taught in their native language at high school. As such, a high grade

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13 Note that even the ‘worst’ German students tend to receive a p-BSA at the end of year 1.
14 Annema and Ooijevaar (2011, p.77) do, in fact, call for the need for further research to individual secondary school subjects, such as English.
does not necessarily reflect the actual English language proficiency level and their active knowledge of the English language.\textsuperscript{15}

A second example of the possible influence of prior education concerns students that were previously enrolled for another programme in higher education, but without completing it. Data shows that these students, on average, score much lower than other students, both in terms of GPA and credits achieved. One of the reasons for this is that they lack certain invaluable study skills, which, as just mentioned, allows for specific advice. Another reason is that they often tend to believe that programmes in higher education are similarly structured, require the same skills and apply the same rules. They are advised to take into account lessons learned during their previous involvement in higher education, while at the same time approaching the BA ES as were it their first academic experience, which requires active participation in induction activities for new students.

Following the first year of experience we introduced an additional question for students that were previously enrolled for another programme in higher education with the aim of gaining more information, namely ‘Please explain, in 100 - 200 words, why you have decided to quit that programme.’ Fewer candidates were invited because of this new question, but in many cases their answers actually confirmed that they had to be invited. Reasons for quitting were often unclear. In addition, in quite a few cases prospective students indicated that the previous programme did not meet her expectations, yet despite this they did not attend our Open Day. Interestingly, these students tend not to mention academic problems.

A final example of the possible influence of prior education concerns Dutch students without a secondary school diploma (VWO). Those students have two options to get access to our programme: a propaedeutic certificate from a university of applied sciences or a colloquium doctum exam. It is sometimes claimed that these students have difficulties adjusting to university and often do not make it. Yet, in our case this group was too small in the first two years of Matching to be able to draw good conclusions. In the third year this was possible, but up until now difference in prior education seems to be not predictive.

\textbf{Discussion}

\textsuperscript{15} Others have noted that, generally, entrance requirements (including well known tests such as TOEFL) do not always provide a proper indication of the language proficiency level (Maiworm & Wächter, 2002).
Matching was developed with three aims in mind: to stabilise (and possible reduce) the number of incoming students, to increase retention and completion rates and to offer an additional service to prospective students. Analysing a large pilot project in the Netherlands, Verbeek, Van Eck and Glaudé (2011) conclude that study choice procedures such as Matching have a positive effect on the connection between students and programme, allow for better advice to students, and tend to lead to better results, even though there does not appear to be an immediate positive effect on retention rates. Based on the previous sections, we would agree with this qualified conclusion and would just like to add one further point: Matching has also allowed us to meet the aim of getting to grips with the size of student intake. Yet, we believe that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ way of doing Matching. In fact, the analysis of comparable data from sister programme AC shows that different variables seem to play a role in terms of students’ study success, despite the many commonalities between AC and ES.

Developing a Matching procedure is rather time-consuming and requires cooperation between several faculty units. For instance, intake interviews with prospective students need to be planned, which requires the help of the front office. At FASoS the programme directors are closely involved in Matching, as are other members of the academic staff and the student advisor. This is something that other studies actually advise in terms of success of transition to higher education and of personal tutoring of students: active involvement of programme managers and “designated school or college staff who have year-on-year responsibility” (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012, p.12; see, also: Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

The personal touch is something prospective students appreciate. Prospective students regularly mention this during the interview. After they have started, students often comment positively on Matching when meeting with their mentor or in the context of the evaluation form that we ask them to complete. Students have the feeling that someone is actually interested in them. They also often remark that the questionnaire made them reflect on their study choice. This may result in them deciding not to start with the BA ES, but it may also make them more confident about their study choice. As one student who received an OK-status told the university paper Observant: “I think the questionnaire is a good idea, especially for ES with its broad programme. And also for students who haven’t put enough thought into it. It forces you to think it over again.” Another student told the
journalist about her receiving an email with advice concerning her English proficiency level: “I was a bit unsure because of that. But a month before I started in Maastricht I passed the Cambridge advanced exam and felt more confident.” At the end of January she had passed all but one course: “I had to write a paper and my grade for the content was okay, but I failed – with a 5.5 – for my English skills. I’m now thinking about taking a language course in writing skills.” (Jansen, 2012).

Yet, the personal approach also has its drawbacks. In particular, as already mentioned, few students decide to withdraw their application after being advised to reconsider. A considerable number of students advised to reconsider (approximately 45%) eventually fail to meet the 42 ECTS to be able to continue in the second year, whereas others often need more than 3-4 years to complete the programme. Since 2013/2014, the ‘NOK after interview’ email has been rephrased to make it more the point, just mentioning the advice to reconsider and the reasons why. Before this year, this email contained an ambiguous message: an advice to reconsider, but, should the student still decide to come, an invitation to the introduction days. This change seems to have had an effect, because whereas in 2012/2013 only a handful of students withdrew after a ‘NOK after interview’, now just over 25% did.

The latter is also an indication that Matching is not a procedure that can be developed in one go. In other words, further development and improvements are necessary, which was an important reason for us to gather the data presented above. As illustrated, based on the annual findings and evaluations of Matching by the students we regularly make adjustments to the questionnaire, ranging from new questions to different phrasing of questions, but also including deleting questions. Currently, three main challenges are high on our agenda. First, how can the procedure be changed to lower the number of students that do not make it, despite the questionnaire (and interview) originally suggesting that they should do well? Second, how can a better insight be acquired as to prevent situations in which students are expected to fail, but actually turn out to perform well? Third, how can we adapt the procedure in such a way as to make it less time consuming? While our experience with, for instance, reading questionnaires and conducting interviews, has helped, we are looking into other possibilities too.

Our experience with and the data gathered about Matching have not only resulted in changes to the Matching procedure itself, but have also resulted in broader programme-
related changes. As such, Matching also allows for institutional learning. In addition to the diagnostic text mentioned earlier, we have also looked at ways in which to enhance first-year experience, in particular at how we introduce students to and help them to become part of the academic community. This starts with student induction. Since 2013/2014 cohort we have a two-day introduction programme that is organised at the start of the academic year to welcome the new students (cf. McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001, p.31). The first day is meant to welcome students in a friendly atmosphere, with only limited attention to some basic issues. Students meet their peers from the first tutor group, as well as their mentor and their tutor. The second day consists of a mentor group meeting, during which the mentor (aided by a senior student) provides specific information about the programme, about study skills (e.g. PBL) and about other important issues. In fact, the mentor programme itself is a novelty that was introduced at the start of Matching and that has been further developed since.

**Conclusion**

Is our format of Matching applicable elsewhere? To some extent it is, yet even at FASoS we have learned that a slightly different approach is needed for the two BA programmes. In other words, when considering similar initiatives it is important to, for instance, develop a questionnaire based on the key characteristics of your programme and your recommended student profile (Verbeek, Van Eck & Galaudé 2011). In addition, make sure to allow for room for experimenting and learning.

But is it worth considering at all? We would argue that it is. While at the moment we have not yet been able to meet all the aims of Matching (regarding retention rates in particular), it has proven to be a positive experience nonetheless. We now have a better insight into the students that are interested in studying the BA ES. More is now known about, for instance, the students’ background, the information sources that influenced their study choice and the impression they have of the programme. As such it is possible to better advise students before the start of the programme. The acquired information also allows for better supervision during the first year, especially during the mentor programme, and has helped us to get a better insight in the challenges encountered by our students.
References


