

A description of Student Practical Placements in the Netherlands.

Co-author:

I.E.R.-International Excellence Reserve – Herbert ten Thij

Student Practical Placements are not regulated by any specific law in the Netherlands. Nevertheless they form often a, sometimes even compulsory part of the curriculum being an important moment in the more professionally orientated education for having the students already during their study in contact with ‘real life’ so-to-say. There has been in the past a short while in which practical placements did not form part of the curriculum anymore when also universities of technology had to reconstruct their curricula after a governmental decision taken on base of an understanding with the industries to shorten the duration of studies. The main argument of the industries was that they considered it wise to have students with just a ‘simple’ basic education who would get their further, more specific education on the job and so would have gained also their practical experience after have being employed for a while already. However, a few years after the first graduations of students without a practical placement experience the industries had to reconsider their initial wisdom that had seemed so cost effectively as well in education as in their human resources management. It had turned out that these graduates were ‘too young’, they were too playful, they were mainly devoted to their own interests, they lacked any company life awareness, they had difficulties to function in a team, etc., etc. So, it was held than wiser to change back to the former system with one year longer study duration in which there is some time in the curricula available to devote to practical placements. By which, for that matter, the saying ‘that true wisdom comes by the years’ had gained than a fresh meaning as well. Anyway, once more Student Practical Placements had reproved their value.

The traditional way Practical Placements (PP’s) are generally organised in the Netherlands can differ from Faculty to Faculty or Department to Department. The highest form of organisation could be considered than the situation in which a Faculty or a Department has appointed a coordinator with some staff to build up, with or without the individual industrial- and business networks of the scientists and teachers in the Faculty or Department, a network of PP prospects and to execute the organisational matters of PP’s, also in connection sometimes with mediation assistance for graduates finding a job after or while finishing their studies, whether or not the first job results from the PP already. The lowest form of organisation is than the situation that a student is ‘assisted’ by the teaching staff to find a PP in their industrial- or business networks with PP possibilities. In either way the quality of the PP’s and whether the student concerned is fit for the particular PP is in the end to be judged and controlled by the teaching staff supervising the student in his or her PP. These ways of organisation still do exist today.

By this it is clear than that PP’s in the Netherlands are commonly to be classified within the University Driven Student Placements Scheme (UDSPS). This classification does not exclude of course the fact that many enterprises are offering themselves PP’s and are looking themselves for the right contact(s) either in the research- or in the vocational oriented universities.

Originally PP’s would take place after a few years of study, either as an orientation possibility as well for the choice of the final studies direction or already as a base for the final study project in which the PP could be also extended (later on) in a way in combination with the work for that final study project. The duration of a PP mostly would take up to a few (ca. three) months as it is experienced that only after some time of initiation, about a month, a

student could participate successfully in the labour process, being so also of value for the enterprise, and gain fully the experience needed or wanted. This way also, besides the regular 3W, a practical 3W (win-win-win [enterprise-student-university]) variant in a (relatively) short term is reached.

Nowadays that all curricula in the Netherlands are reconstructed to be embedded in the Bachelor-Master (BaMa) structure most PP's take place in the Master's education. However, still in some faculties/departments a so-called internal stage is compulsory in the Bachelor's education to be certain that the students will be later on useful hands in a laboratory or a research environment, especially if they continue their studies on Master's level. Examples of this could be found in the studies of Biomedical Engineering or Chemical Technology.

It would seem obvious that a PP would be connected to the final study project. Yet, in some faculties/departments it is a policy that the subject (and work) for the final project should differ from that in a PP. This than obviously to guarantee a wider interests experience of the graduates. An example of this policy can be found in the studies of Informatics and Bio-Informatics. In other faculties/departments the same aim is reached by having the PP 'accompanied' by two (subject) different internal stages. An example of this policy could be found in the studies of Electrical Engineering.

Usually a PP would entail about 20 ECTS, but this may differ from case to case. Anyway, how much the PP in aim, form and organisation may vary in the Netherlands, in all cases the performance of a PP abroad is promoted.