

Building an international community

Bridging the gap by meeting each other in an early stage

Dutch high-tech companies and knowledge institutes have indicated that they are experiencing a shortage of highly educated technicians and engineers. Therefore they must attract foreign students and knowledge workers to study and work in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, a lot of students who have finished their bachelor's or master's degree at a Dutch university don't succeed in finding a job within a year. Apparently, there is a gap to bridge. On Tuesday June the 28th, a group of experts, professionals, scientists and foreign students met at the HighTechCentre Delft to discuss this issue. And try to find solutions.



Fifteen experts discussed how to improve the match between supply and demand of international knowledge workers.

A variety of highly involved people

Since 2011, High Tech NL has been carrying out the Human Capital agenda for top-sector HTSM (High Tech Systems & Materials). One of the focus issues is the special attention that is paid to foreign students and international knowledge workers. The Dutch high-tech industry and knowledge institutes need additional brainpower to work on research and development. High Tech NL has built up a rich network of professionals and experts involved in this issue. From this network, 15 professionals, including four foreign students, were invited to the HighTechCenterDelft to have an in-depth discussion. Apart from

discussing several items concerning knowledge workers, the objective was to expand the network of the people involved so that they can share knowledge and experiences and ask each other for advice. The University of Technology of Delft, ROA (Research Institute of Education and Labor Market), the Twente Expat Center, and Academic Transfer were just some of the organizations present at this meeting.

If we need them, why can't they find a job?

To answer this question, we first had to define the 'we' and 'they' involved. It was easy to agree that 'they' refers to foreign students and

knowledge workers in the field of technology and ICT. It was also easy to agree on the fact that 'we' refers to high-tech companies and research institutes. Managers and CEOs constantly tell the world that they are worried about the scarcity of highly educated technicians and researchers. Ms Caroline Scheepmaker is working at the Delft University of Technology;



Master students and professionals sharing knowledge

“Nevertheless, it is difficult for those who have just finished their studies to find their first job. If it takes them more than a year to find a job, non-EU citizens have to return home. Apparently, even that urgency is not enough to match companies and graduates easily.” Mr. Ron Hartman is commercial director at TSO, a company that, until now, has mainly hired and placed technicians at the vocational level. He states that “most of

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the SMEs in the field of technology upgrade the level of education. At a certain point they will have to hire (foreign) candidates with bachelors and masters degrees. But the first step is the most difficult to take. It seems to be a generation problem. The cultural distance seems to be too big.” A good example was found in the Twente region where a successful SME owner was encouraged to hire four new knowledge workers from abroad. After some hesitation he did. And he thanked his advisors for that; a completely new dimension was added to his company!

Try to speak Dutch and you will get an answer in English

Prof. Dr. Andries de Grip is chief researcher at ROA, which is part of Maastricht University. He knows that students and employers meet too late. It would be better if they met in an

informal setting way before the students are finishing their studies. He confirms that the Dutch economy needs internationals, not only in the field of technology but in other sectors like scientific research, health and chemistry as well. For one reason, it is easier to make a match with universities than with companies. This is confirmed by Ms Francien Horrevorts, who is working as a communication advisor for Academic Transfer. “At some universities more than 50% of the PhDs are foreigners. During their study, they work in an international setting. Although they idea is generally accepted that internationals should learn to speak and understand the Dutch language, this is not that easy. If they try to speak Dutch, they will get an answer in English.”

Finding a job for spouses

Davey Debo and Leon Sleurink are graduate students at Utrecht University. They have studied the push- and pull elements for foreign knowledge workers, especially among those who work for more than three years in the Netherlands. They know that for employers it is important that highly educated technicians and researchers – Dutch and non-Dutch alike – stay longer than two years to offer return on investment. Davey: “first of all, it is important that internationals can find their way easily in our



All around the table at the HighTechCenterDelft

country. Find housing, a Burgerservicenummer (BSN) and a family doctor.” Michelle Ekkelkamp, from the Twente Expat Centre, agrees with the students. “When internationals start to live in our region, we try to help them to organize everything that is necessary to feel comfortable. Even finding a job for their spouses could be part of this service.” Leon adds: “formalities should be arranged in the first few weeks. And then again, it is important that expats experience personal development and career development in their job. This element seems to be more important than salary.” Prof De Grip agrees: “Those who have

already made the choice to leave their country will look for another employer, perhaps in another country, if they do not have the opportunity to grow.”

Teachers are interested in us

Thus far, we talked about international talent. But what is their opinion about this issue? Four international students participated in the expert meeting. Aman, who is from India, is studying Aerospace technology at Delft University of Technology. “I experience a lot of freedom. The Netherlands is a non-hierarchical country. On the one hand a lot of freedom is offered, but on the other hand you have to deal with a lot of responsibility – working in teams as well as working as an individual. This is recognized by Alister from Scotland, and Bernat and Aitor from Spain. The three of them spent a semester at the Haagse Hogeschool studying European Projects. “We had to get used to the idea that we call teachers by their first name. On the other hand, they are really interested in us. They know, for example, what our tasks are in the project and what contribution we have made as individuals to the teamwork.” None of the students had considered staying and working in the Netherlands. Until now perhaps?

Get to know your future

Mr. Vincent Vitters, owner of Interlect and Globities and Mr. Menno van den Berk of Stichting Berk, organized a few months ago a meet & greet at Fontys Hogescholen in Eindhoven, called ‘Get to know your future’. Vincent: “We invited 10 representatives of companies in the field of technology and ICT. Both large companies like Vanderlande Industries and Océ Technologies and several SMEs. We offered them the possibility to get in contact with about 80 foreign students of Fontys, most of them studying embedded

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software”. Menno: “In an informal setting, people get in contact with each other much more easily. There was no obligation whatsoever to introduce the company’s core activities and expertise. The students could ask any question at all. It is amazing to see that employers know within ten minutes which students would match with their company and employees. They do not need assessments.

Their gut feeling is enough”. By the way, the same goes for students. This kind of matchmaking seems to be much more effective than the most advanced apps and software programs

The iHRD program seems to be successful

“Matching employers with employees something between people”, Vincent says. Together with High Tech NL, he developed the iHRD concept about two years ago. This is a series of peer meetings with foreign students discussing their personal challenges in bridging cultural gaps between studying, living and working in the Netherlands and their home countries. During the sessions they are getting in contact with employers as well. This guides them smoothly to finding an entry point in the labor market. Vincent; “it is too early yet to state that iHRD is a success, but I can already conclude that this concept is highly appreciated by the students.”

We learned a lot. Again!

After finishing the expert meeting, the participants were asked to write down their advice to improve the situation of foreign students and knowledge workers in the context of the Human Capital agendas of High Tech NL and top-sector HTSM. The following are some interesting pieces of advice offered by participants:

- Companies should, at least, invest in meetings with foreign students
- Encourage firms to recruit their first foreign employees
- Increase transparency in vacancies
- Students should learn Dutch during studies
- Facilitate formalities even more than now
- Organize meet & matches all the time
- Present students to companies
- Increase the employers’ branding of Dutch high-tech industry abroad by joining forces
- Offer tax advantage to companies who recruit expats
- Show SMEs that diversity offers richness and variety
- Don’t stereotype, but meet up with potential employers
- Focus on SMEs

And what about those of us who participated in the expert meeting? We learned a lot from each other. Again!

Jos van Erp July 6th, 2016

Program Director High Tech NL

