



LINKING RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE



Students Should Succeed

EAIR 35th Annual Forum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands

28-31 August 2013

Name of Author(s)

Nynke Jo Smit
Freek Schiphorst
Ank van den Berg
Katherine Voorvelt

Contact Details

Nynke Jo Smit
Erasmus University Rotterdam/ International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands
E-mail: njsmit@iss.nl

Key words

Diversity, Inclusive/ exclusive higher education, Internationalisation, Non-completion and progression, Quality

Abstract

The International Institute of Social Studies has a Master of Arts programme in Development Studies with more than 95% international students, coming from over 60 different nationalities. As students choose this programme very carefully, they make every effort to finish their studies successfully in 15.5 months, resulting in a high success rate. Factors that contribute toward this success are: meticulous screening of applicants, as well as the careful organisation of the programme, including measures that the Erasmus University Rotterdam, to which ISS belongs, summarizes as “Nominal is Normal”. Nevertheless, some 5% of the students do not fulfil the requirements for acquiring the degree, and some 5% succeed with only a narrow margin. As every failing student is one too many, we need to know if this could have been prevented. More specifically, we would also like to determine, if the application procedure could be improved. With our new database system, we are now able to check this, and we would like to present our results at the EAIR Forum.

Students should succeed

The International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, is a university institute of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. It offers a Master of Arts programme in Development Studies with more than 95% international students, representing over 60 different nationalities. Over the past seven years, more than 94% of the enrolled students graduated. This is a rate that could make many a student counsellor and Institute's administrator happy. Indeed, in comparison with other MA Programmes with international students this figure stands out as high. Yet, it still leaves room for improvement. For every student who fails to graduate this is a personal drama. To spend almost 16 months away from home and having to return without a diploma is a major loss of face (not to speak of the financial loss). We have asked ourselves the question whether there is something that we could have done to prevent this. Can we identify factors that make success unlikely? And can we use these either in our selection procedure, by not give admission to prospective students with a high fail potential. Alternatively, can these identifiable factors be further used in our approach to teaching by giving extra attention to guide students who run such a risk?

For this paper, we have set ourselves two objectives. First of all, we want to analyse the factors that make our students do well, and to determine whether in our current practices there is room for improvement. Second, we want to analyse the reasons why a small percentage of our students fail to graduate. Is this a reality we have to live with or can we find interventions to further increase the graduation rate?

The paper is structured as follows: the first section will outline the factors that in our opinion contribute to the success of ISS. This section is divided in five parts, each highlighting an important aspect, namely: the ISS selection procedure, our dedicated attention to the international classroom environment, our counselling practices, idiosyncrasies of our students, and finally, procedures in our grading system which favour the idea that graduating in the nominal study period is normal (in EUR language: Nominal=Normal). In the second section, we focus our attention on the group of students that did not graduate, to see whether an improved admission policy could reduce their number.

The outline of the structure is as follows:

- Study Success at ISS
- What contributes in our opinion to the high success rate at ISS?
 - Careful selection
 - Academic qualifications
 - Relevant work experience
 - Reference letters
 - Motivation statement
- Attention to the international classroom and overall environment
- Counselling, mentoring and supervision
- Determining Factors of our student body that contribute to its success
 - Selected on the basis of motivation-
 - Under pressure to perform (financial; from family and employer; status considerations)
 - Cohort dynamics
 - Away from home, without distraction from family / environment
- N=N measures (compensation; single re-sit with cap)
- Characteristics of the students who have not graduated
- Conclusions

Study Success at ISS

The International Institute of Social Studies

The Master of Arts (MA) programme in Development Studies has an enrolment of approximately 180 students every academic year. These students hail from all corners of the world; in every master cohort we have at least 60 different nationalities. Although not as diverse as our student population, the staff at ISS is fairly international; the current staff is drawn from 29 countries from all over the world. To accommodate the international environment at ISS, the lingua franca is English.

The MA is accredited by the Dutch-Flemish accreditation agency NVAO, with a distinctive feature “good” for “Internationalisation”. The International Accreditation Council for Global Development Studies and Research of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) also accredited the programme.

The MA programme at ISS is quite different from a regular Dutch MA programme. ISS was founded in 1952 and since July 2009 it is part of the Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Netherlands. It is an international graduate school of policy-oriented critical social science, focussing on capacity building in the “Global South”, by teaching and conducting interdisciplinary research and advisory work in the field of development studies. From the 1950s, ISS has catered especially for mid-career professionals from developing countries and countries in transition. Currently, ISS is gradually attracting new audiences, like young bright students with little work experience and students from OECD countries.

Success Rate

The following table gives the details of the graduation percentage of the past seven years for ISS and for the other EUR master programmes.

Table 1: Student Completion Rates 2006-2012 (state of affairs 01-07-2013)

Cohort	Students enrolled ISS(N)	Percentage of students graduated within nominal study period ¹ ISS	Percentage of students graduated ISS	Percentage of students graduated within nominal study period EUR	Percentage of students graduated EUR
2005-06	177	92%	97%	32%	32%
2006-07	185	92%	97%	30%	30%
2007-08	191	93%	96%	21%	21%
2008-09	197	92%	94%	22%	22%
2009-10	200	89%	94%	22%	22%
2010-11	185	84%	95%	28%	28%
2011-12	174	84%	89%	33%	33%
TOTAL	1309	90%	95%	n/a	n/a

Source: ISS data base, and Rapportage Management Informatie Erasmus Universiteit 2013

The data show that ISS is doing relatively well; especially in ensuring that the great majority of students graduate within the nominal study period.

We want to stress that we do not reach this result by introducing low standards. On the contrary, we have a clear system of Quality Assurance, involving external assessors from renowned European universities, who comment on the coursework, the assessments and grading, and who have a final say in all distinctions, near passes and fail marks for Research Papers (theses).

¹ The nominal study period for the ISS MA programme is 15.5 months (88 ECTS); the nominal study period for the other EUR Master programmes is 12 months (60 ECTS).

ISS' Vision on Teaching and Success rates

ISS is well aware that the success of international education is to a large extent attributable to the acumen of our staff, both academic and support, who realize that they are the ones who create the social environment in which the student lives and works for 15.5 months. This helps a comfortable assimilation of our students in a multicultural environment. The ISS vision is that internationalization permeates through all its corridors, that it is a conscious approach, and not limited to a specific office as an isolated case.

On the one hand, one could argue that it is “obvious” that ISS students graduate. After all, the applicants have the necessary qualifications and competences and are highly motivated. Yet, on the other hand, we claim that our didactical approach contributes in no small measure to this success. This approach is inspired by what De Groot (1972) has called the “expedition model”, as opposed to the system of permanent selection or “cross-country race”. In a programme with the latter model, students have a long and difficult study-track to follow with lots of obstacles. It is a process of continuous selection with many drop-outs, and those who do reach the finish, differ widely in the time needed to complete the study. In contrast to this, the study-track in the expedition model has a specific duration. The adage is “We’re in this together”, rather than “survival of the fittest” (De Groot, 1972: 24). The way in which ISS has used this “expedition model” to shape its approach is elaborated below.

Careful Selection

Most students hear of ISS via the alumni network (including friends, colleagues or relatives who studied at ISS). Traditionally, ISS students were mid-career professionals who had been out of a classroom for some five to ten years. They were at a stage in their career where in order to move on they needed to enhance their skills and knowledge. Their choice for ISS is often inspired by issues that find their origin in their work environment. Sometimes the choice, therefore, is issue driven and they hope to find academic solutions to pressing problems. At other times, the choice is also “people” driven, and ISS is recommended to them by colleagues or friends who graduated from ISS and even bosses! The result is that our students seldom come only with academic knowledge obtained in a recently completed first degree programme. The knowledge they acquired during their previous studies has been enriched by solid work experience.

To ensure that participants will be able to complete the programme successfully, ISS has set strict admission criteria, in terms of academic background, knowledge of English, motivation and work experience.

For the majority of students, the 15.5 months study at the ISS is a tremendous sacrifice, not only financially but also because they have to leave their families, and either take leave of absence from their work or quit their job.

This is one of the prime reasons why ISS spends a lot of effort in meticulously screening and selecting students.

All applications come to the admission office via the web-based application system iApply where students can upload all necessary documents, like diplomas and transcripts as well as reference letters.

Academic Qualifications

The applicants for the MA are required to have a BA degree in one of the social sciences or equivalent, issued by a recognised university. They must have obtained at least class 2.2 (Lower Second, Good, B or equivalent). Applicants from specific countries, like Bhutan and Nepal, are required to even have an MA degree. Professional experience relevant to the major in which the applicant wishes to study is normally expected and is a preference for admission.

Applicants who are not native English speakers are required to demonstrate their proficiency in the language with an IELTS academic test with a score of at least 6.5 or a comparable proof.

Work experience and other references

The selection procedure at ISS gives weight to relevant work experience. The MA at ISS is policy oriented and we want our students to perceive the relevance of their studies in The Hague as a continuous experience.

About one-third of ISS students are government officials, working in ministries or in local governments, or as community development officers. A second group of ISS students is employed as researchers in research institutes, as journalists, consultants or university lecturers. A third group of students work in different sectors in the civil society, including international and national NGO's or community based organizations.

Finally, there is a group of young graduates with relatively little work experience. In selecting these candidates we require from the latter group either better marks in their recent degree and/or very strong motivation and reference letters. The share of this group has gradually been increasing: while it was eight per cent in 2005-06, it was 20% per cent in 2012-13. The average age of the student body changed from 30 years and 9 months in 2005-06, to just below 28 years and 8 months in 2012-2013.

Table 2: Shift in work experience

Cohort	Government	Research / Higher Education	Civil Society	Other	No work experience
2005-06	26%	19%	42%	5%	8%
2012-13	26%	11%	33%	10%	20%

References

In addition, we require three reference letters which are considered seriously in the selection procedure. They give us some indication as to how the candidate has performed not only during earlier studies, but also in a work environment which is relevant to the curriculum at ISS and where previously acquired competencies had to be applied.

Motivation

We also pay serious attention to the motivation statement which a candidate has to provide. Not only does it give us some indication on how serious the applicant is, but also gives us the possibility to assess whether ISS can fulfil the objectives and desires which the prospective student holds. If all formal application requirements are fulfilled, the applications are assessed by two academic staff members. This assessment is based on the students' academic background, their motivation statement, work experience and references. When the two academic staff members have given their assessment, independent of each other, the system alerts the Academic Registrar that an application is waiting for final decision, based on the assessments and comments received.

Attention to the International Overall Environment and the International Classroom

Introduction

Once the student is accepted, ISS maintains a steady contact not only with respect to finances and housing issues (ISS provides housing at the Hague campus), but also with more general newsletters for prospective students.

Students receive a link to the electronic learning environment with pre-arrival information: a Welcome Booklet, the Academic Calendar and a password to login for study related material such as the (e-)readings for the general course in Development Studies.

They also receive information on how to travel from Schiphol to The Hague. Although, as is customary at ISS, in almost all cases, students are picked up at the airport by a fellow student from the existing batch who welcomes them and accompanies them to The Hague - the ISS building and the student housing.

In the first week of the MA programme, ISS offers a week long detailed introductory programme. To contribute to the establishment of a community, the introductory week includes not only practical information about the study programme, the staff and all kinds of facilities, but also a profound introduction to their fellow students, to life at ISS, in The Hague and in The Netherlands generally. There are workshops about life in The Netherlands, interpersonal relationships in a multi-cultural setting, and cross-cultural communication. To give them a feel of the country, the welfare office organises two trips- one within the city of the Hague and the other to another city in the Netherlands.

As ISS is a small intimate campus, once students have settled down they become a large multi-cultural family and attention given to intercultural communication, gender differences in a multicultural setting and prevention of harassment are an asset to them.

Creation of a student community and the international classroom

The creation of an ISS student community is not an automatic process. It requires not only consistent effort to make students feel at home in an unfamiliar environment, but also to create a common intellectual ground and to convert the existing student diversity into an effective resource in the teaching-learning process.

Hence, community building and attention to cultural diversity do not stop after the first introductory week, but continue throughout the academic year. We have a welfare office within ISS that coordinates and organises activities for international students, and gives them time to express their concerns. This office takes immediate action when students are confronted with unforeseen calamities at home.

The student housing department manages several student hostels that provide the basis for regular student interaction.

In 2009, ISS won the first Orange Carpet for Dutch higher education institutes, awarded by Nuffic, for best practices in internationalisation and helping students to feel at home in The Netherlands.

ISS organises specific events and activities, such as an International Day (where the international students present aspects of their own culture), the International Food Fair (where students cook food from their own country) or the Dutch Evening (during which typical Dutch activities and delicacies are presented). ISS has a rich offer of extra-curricular activities. There are many conferences, lecture series, or seminars that students can attend. The active student organisation also organises a large number of events aimed at enhancing the learning experience of ISS students.

Creating a level playing field

In spite of detailed screening, ISS goes a step further. During the introductory week, a few diagnostic tests are given to detect any lacuna in proficiency in English language, academic and numerical skills, as well as an assessment focusing on IT skills (the European Computer Driving Licence, or ECDL). Students who seem to be weak in any of these skills are referred to the remedial courses that ISS offers to give students a better foundation.

Subsequently, we try to create a level playing field directly from the start, as we have students from so many different backgrounds. Therefore we organise foundational courses, in economics, sociology/anthropology and political science/international relations/law, as well as a general course in Development Histories, Theories and Practices.

Didactical approach: the international classroom

The programme's central didactical concept, i.e. the use of student diversity and experience within the academic programme, is evident from some specific features of the curriculum. We use a comparative orientation within almost all courses. The programme provides students with knowledge and understandings derived from different theoretical frameworks, geographical contexts or social environments. This diversity is at the core of ISS' didactical concept: it is a major resource that is used not only in the curriculum, but also in the entire learning experience that ISS provides. The diversity is also explicitly tapped on in classrooms where interactive lectures encourage students to participate actively. ISS creates a learning environment that deepens understanding, enhances critical skills, broadens horizons, sensitizes towards difference and enhances communication skills.

Our academic faculty itself is correspondingly diverse (in terms of disciplinary backgrounds, expertise, origin of country and cultural backgrounds, etc.) They are attentive to the background of their students and encourage an interactive environment in the classroom. The adage "staff learns as much from students as students from staff" is not an empty PR slogan at ISS

Counselling, Mentoring and Supervision

In reality, managing a diverse student body is not always easy. Occasionally, there are students who feel overwhelmed, while others feel not sufficiently challenged. ISS has an active student counselling, both at the institute level and at the level of the Majors. When students apply for admission, they indicate already which Major they plan to take.

As mentioned earlier, the ISS curriculum starts off with foundational courses and a general course in Development Histories, Theories and Practices. Thereafter, students start with their Major, followed by two elective courses. The programme is completed with the writing of a Research Paper, for which students attend a series of workshops and several research techniques courses. Students are assisted in their selection of course through discussion and advice with the Convenor of their major. In addition, each major assigns mentors from among the academic staff to small group of students. Individual mentoring takes place on the request of the student.

Choice of the major is an important anchor for the students during their stay at ISS. From the moment the major starts, cohort building starts by designated activities aimed to gel the students into a group. These activities take place both in the class as well as outside, and deal with substantive issues related to the area of the major as well as with social activities. It is ISS' firm belief that the formation of a student cohort gives our international students support; thus contributing to the successful completion of the programme.

In all this, the convenor of the major plays an important role. The Convenor provides academic guidance to students throughout their stay. In addition to counselling for selection of the courses, the Convenor monitors the academic progress of each individual student by discussing assessment results every term with the Academic Registrar. If necessary, students are invited for a discussion with the Convenor, and at times in the presence of the Chair of the Board of Examiners and given advice.

Writing of the Research Paper is accommodated by a series of buttressing activities. Plenary lectures expose students to methodological aspects which are alternated with Major-based small groups moderated by lecturing staff. The topic of the Research Paper and its methodological approach are thus discussed in small peer groups with guidance from staff. The workshop lectures and sessions are designed to stimulate the development of good quality designs. These designs are presented to all students in the Major, the supervisor and the second reader from among the staff.

This part of the programme runs concurrently with the second half of the course work. Thereafter students receive guidance from their supervisor on the collection of data, their analysis and finally working on the first draft which is presented as work in progress in a seminar with discussants from among their peer group in the Major as well as relevant staff members. This whole process therefore guides the student to a researchable RP project, of a size which is manageable in the allocated time set for it, and supported by academic supervision and peer group support.

We can illustrate this with two specific cases. One of our students had a supervisor who had some difficulties in coming to grips with his complex ideas about health policies in the former Soviet republic. This highly intelligent man had relatively poor English competencies and even though some of his ideas seemed excellent, he had rather too many ideas at once. The student was heading for a fail. At the student's request, two new members of staff took over the task of supervision from the existing supervisor and second reader. There was a division of labour among the two staff. One focused on advising the student in relation to required reading. The other focused on working with the student, one to one, to enable him to express his own ideas more effectively. Both gave extensive feedback on how to simplify and restructure the study. He was advised to focus on very specific objectives and to drop his more encyclopaedic approach. The outcome was a study that made an original and meaningful contribution to debates about health policy, comparing these in his country with other policies elsewhere in the world. What made the difference in this case was that the staff proved amenable to a request by the student to change his supervisory team. The transfer happened early in the process, thus making it possible for the new team, to have a role in restructuring the focus and approach.

Another student was called for a meeting with the Chair of the Board of Examiners and the Academic Registrar for a case of sloppy referencing (if not simply plagiarism) in an essay. The student explained that her results were very poor and she thought that it was hardly possible for her to pass, but that she really had to succeed, because she had received a fellowship from the Netherlands Fellowships Programme. As she was very distressed, she had resorted to cut-and-paste some internet sources.

In the meeting we touched upon the possible causes for her lack of self-confidence, as her employer, her embassy and the ISS admission committee all had supported her application for the fellowship.

She had been given the task to re-write her essay totally in her own words, and she was referred to the ISS teacher for academic writing for additional support. The teacher made her write a paragraph every single day on what she had learned that day.

A few weeks later, she told that the meeting had opened her eyes, and had brought back the conviction that she indeed was competent, and gradually her marks began to increase sufficiently for her to graduate.

Determining Factors of our student body that contribute to its success

We do realize that our students themselves have features that contribute to their success. After all, the ISS selected them on the basis of their academic skills and qualifications.

It is important to recognise that students who follow a residential 15.5 months study programme away from home are under pressure to return successfully. This is the *raison d'être* for coming abroad for higher education. They made the promise to their home-front when they left. Breaking promises is never easy, but is even more difficult when that home-front has made sacrifices too. An employer might have agreed to pay the salary during the study leave, a spouse or parent is taking care of a child (sometimes children), love has to

survive miles of distance and mirrored skype images. Relatives and friends sometimes have contributed financially to afford the tuition fee. This assembled home-front is expecting, at the very least, in return for their contribution to the success of their loved one, a diploma; a diploma which sometimes opens the doors to a new career or a promotion. This pressure on the student not to let the home- front down contributes to the motivation and discipline which they show while in The Hague.

In this drive to perform, the student is not alone: she/he is part of a group of like-wise peers who face the same pressures and challenges from outside ISS. And they have the same exam dates! At ISS we consciously invest in cohort building because we believe that it supports the learning environment of our international student body.

Last but not least, we cannot overemphasize the fact that students at ISS are away from home, family and work. There is, therefore, less distraction from these sources. They can (and do) concentrate fully on their studies and since ISS strictly adheres to a formal study load of 40 hours a week, sufficient time is available for an extra effort. At the same time, their new peers confront the same time pressure and will – therefore - not give in to distraction as might come from non-studious friends.

Other organizational measures (N=N)

A main focus is on keeping the group together in a nominal study pace. One of the measures is that students who do not participate in the first exam or who do not submit before the first deadline for assignments, will automatically receive a mark of zero, unless they can prove (to the Board of Examiners) that their absence is caused by “force majeure”. Similarly, students have to ask for an extension from the Board of Examiners to submit an assignment after the deadline. Students are only allowed to re-sit courses for which they have failed the assessment. The mark for the re-sit will be capped at 60 (we grade on a scale from 0-100; 60 being a bare pass result). In this way, we discourage “gambling” behaviour and the tendency to delay. At the same time, students are allowed to compensate a fail mark by high marks in other courses: the overall average of all course work has to be 60 and students may have (not more than) two fail marks and no mark lower than 45. The final research paper must have a pass mark.

Characteristics of Students who did not graduate

Due to all the measures and features discussed above, 90% of our students finish their programme in time (table 1); another 5% need an extension to finish the programme. However, approximately 5% of the students do not fulfil the requirements for the degree, and there are very few students who only succeed with a narrow pass mark (60-62).

Extension can only be granted by the Board of Examiners who apply strict rules that extensions will only be allowed on the basis of “force majeure”. Therefore, a student who gets an extension beyond the final graduation date has indeed faced a serious problem. Among the reasons for an extension are: female students giving birth, serious illness of the student or family circumstances necessitating a return home.

In other words, an extension is not a sign of a weak student. Students with an extension rarely graduate with a narrow pass; some of them even receive a distinction.

We wanted to close the quality assurance loop and check the possible causes of fails and narrow passes.

More specifically we wanted to know if there have been oversights and some indications gone undetected in our application procedure. This information could then be fed back into the initial application procedure.

Possible contributing factors to study success that we intended to check were:

- gender
- nationality
- working experience
- work environment
- funding (fellowship or own account)
- level and topic of first degree
- age
- time passed since previous degree

Table 3: Student Completion Rates 2006-2012 (state of affairs 01-07-2013)

Cohort	Students enrolled (N)	Students graduated within 16 months (N)	Students graduated after extension	Students graduated (Total)	Not graduated
2005-06	177	163	8	171	6
2006-07	185	171	8	179	6
2007-08	191	177	7	184	7
2008-09	197	182	4	186	11
2009-10	200	177	11	188	12
2010-11	185	156	20	176	9
2011-12	174	147	8	155	19
TOTAL	1309	1173	66	1239	70

Between 2005 and 2012 we had 70 students who did not graduate, 5.3% of the total number of students.

As these reasons were not properly recorded in the past, we cannot give a clear indication about the exact number in each category. We can be more specific, however, on the extensions of the 2011-12 group; 8 students graduated after 16 months; 19 students in this group have not yet graduated. We have specified the reasons below.

Table 4: Extensions 2011-2012

Reason	Number of students; Already graduated	Number of Students; Not yet graduated
Fail in Research Paper possibility to re-submit	2	5
Part time programme		4
Physical health issues	2	1
Family circumstances		3
Mental health issues	1	2
Need for full time job / financial problems	1	2
Pregnancy	1	
Computer crash		1
Additional internship	1	
Expelled due to repeated plagiarism		1
TOTAL	8	19

As such, some of our students with extensions are part time students who have consciously planned to finish their programme (next to their job) in two consecutive years. Other extensions point mostly at real force majeure: physical and mental problems, or family matters, that call for urgent attention and support for the student. The percentage of “real fails” seems to be around 3%. Therefore, we need to concentrate more on improving our inclusive way of education, as it is clear that we are quite successful in this respect.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to refer to the title of our paper “Students should graduate”. The ground laid by ISS, as detailed in this paper, certainly contributes towards the success of our students. The ISS MA is an example of a study programme organized via the principles of the “expedition model”. In accordance with this, the percentage of fails is very low; and the majority of the fail cases are caused by force majeure situations.

The current data indicate that we have to contend with that.

However, what we would like to do further, is concentrate on data collection on the causes for low results during the study process. We have to try to detect, even sooner, students who possibly might get delayed or fail especially if these are matters that could (partly) be influenced by ISS, particularly emotional problems that arise because of studies that a student unexpectedly finds difficult to cope with or fear of failure or financial problems that could have been prevented.

References

- Erasmus (2013) ‘Erasmus University wants to introduce the “Nominal=Normal” system’, accessed 7 August 2013 < http://www.eur.nl/english/news/detail_news/article/46852-erasmus-university-wants-to-introduce-the-nominalnormal-system/>.
- Groot, A.D., de (ed.) (1972) *Selectie voor en in het hoger onderwijs, een probleemanalyse*. Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij.
- Institute of Social Studies (2011) ‘Critical Reflection MA in Development Studies Including Internationalisation as a Distinctive Quality Feature’. The Hague: ISS/EUR.
- Rapportage Management Informatie Erasmus Universiteit (2013) ‘De universiteit in control’. Bijlage J Instellingstoets Kwaliteitszorg.