

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 10, Issue 4 (2014)

Research Article

The Use of Matching as a Study Choice Aid by Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies: Facilitating Transition to Higher Education?

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Citation

Bijsmans, P. and Harbers, P. (2014). 'The Use of Matching as a Study Choice Aid by Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies: Facilitating Transition to Higher Education?', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 10 (4), pp. 456-471.

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

Programmes in higher education are confronted with decreasing funds and increasing demands from national governments concerning, for instance, access to higher education and retention and completion rates. In this light it is important that prospective students make the right study choice. Since 2011 Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies is using a procedure called 'Matching', which is meant to facilitate prospective students' self-reflection about their study choice. This article explains how Matching complements existing arrangements related to transition to higher education, such as open days and induction weeks, and presents our experience to this point. We have so far only partly been able to meet the initial aims of Matching. Nevertheless, we believe that arrangements such as this can benefit both undergraduate programmes and their students, as it provides a better insight into study choice and into intervention that can improve transition to higher education.

Keywords

Matching; retention; study choice; study success; transition; teaching European Studies

A mismatch between incoming 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 early withdrawal from the chosen undergraduate programme (e.g. Briggs et al. 2012; Brinkworth et al. 2009). 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 applicants, but should also help increase retention and completion rates, issues that are on the agenda of many national governments. 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, job perspectives, city and institution, as well as influence by friends and family, perceptions of own strengths and weaknesses, and numerous social variables (e.g. Leveson et al. 2013; Yorke and Longden 2004).

Many of the challenges resulting from an insufficiently informed study choice tend to become visible in the first year of studies. In fact, as Trotter and Roberts (2006: 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'. The first year is of particular importance within Dutch higher education, where, at the end of the first year, students will often have to pass a minimum number of credits to be able to continue their studies, the so-called Binding Study Advice (BSA). Yet, most programmes are not allowed to employ selection or lottery procedures upon application and prospective students only need to meet basic requirements to be admissible to higher education. Selection is, amongst other reasons, only possible when programmes are based on specific excellence trajectories or when additional requirements are needed, such as is the case for art academies.

While discussion on whether or not selection should be implemented continues (e.g. Sluijter et al. 2011), most Dutch undergraduate programmes are currently in the process of introducing questionnaires, test exams, and other instruments aimed at helping students to make a more informed study choice. Developed under the heading of 'Matching', these arrangements are offered to students who are admissible to Dutch higher education and who are already at an early stage of the formal application process. Matching may not be a selection tool, yet it is also not without

obligation, like arrangements developed elsewhere (e.g. Brinkworth et al. 2009: 170; Ribchester et al. 2014). Prospective students *have* to complete the procedure to get a place in the programme of their choice.

Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES) already introduced a Matching procedure in 2011. The BA ES is a programme for students with an interest in the cultural, historical, political and social aspects of Europe and as such adopts a broader perspective on European developments than programmes that solely focus on European integration (cf. Rumford 2009). It is also a programme that attracts many international students. Like other programmes in higher education we have been struggling with the challenges outlined above. In this article we will discuss our experience with Matching and our initial attempts to gain a better insight into determinants of study success. Therefore we will compare the outcome of the Matching procedure with first-year study results of the three cohorts of students that so far took part in the procedure and actually started their studies (2011/2012, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014). We will discuss to what extent individual questions on the questionnaire help us to prevent incoming students with advice and, hence, ease transition.

We will argue that Matching has helped us to gain a better understanding of prospective students' study choice, although the procedure is not fail-proof. The interview, in particular, seems to have an added value. Students report that Matching offers them an additional opportunity to reflect on their study choice. Matching also enables us to address potential challenges at an early stage, while at the same time forming a very useful source for institutional learning. Hence, we believe that Matching can fill a gap between two other important activities that play a role in study choice and transition to higher education: information activities, such as open days, and induction activities, such as introduction weeks. Matching could, therefore, also benefit higher education programmes outside of the Netherlands, in particular by better facilitating study choice and transition to university.

MATCHING AS A TRANSITION AID

As Briggs et al (2012: 6) explain, transition from secondary school to higher education starts with young people informing themselves about the programmes on offer and continues well into the first year of their studies. As such, information and induction activities play an important part in preparing students for their new life at university. Information activities and sources (including university websites) are targeted at secondary school pupils and others who are comparing options for future studying. Open days, in particular, tend to have a positive influence on retention, as long as the information provided is in line with the actual nature of the programme (e.g. Briggs 2006; Trotter and Roberts 2006). Induction activities are aimed at familiarising new students with academic life and at meeting staff and fellow students. Such activities can help prevent dropout, especially when the focus is on a mixture of social activities, programme content, and academic challenges (e.g. Bowles et al. 2014; Richardson and Tate 2013).

Prospective students often decide to register for several programmes to be sure of a place, but also because of the overwhelming amount of choice, therewith postponing the final choice (e.g. Briggs 2006: 708). In addition, incomplete or incorrect expectations often influence a student's chances of study success, because, in the words of Christie et al. (2008: 571), this can be 'deeply unsettling'. Therefore, one of the main challenges for programmes in higher education is to align students' expectations with their actual experience, in order to prevent problems during the first year of their studies. Interestingly, Brinkworth et al. (2009) note that prospective students are aware that studying at university will be different from high school, yet their expectations still do not match with actual practice. Hence, 'mechanisms need to be put into place that enable them to bridge the transition from high school to university and facilitate a successful integration into the changed demands of tertiary education' (170). As such, Matching may be able to fill the gap between information and induction

activities, because, as Billing (1997: 129) also writes, '[m]ore pre-enrolment guidance is needed. Many students seek reassurance of more contact with the university department between their commitment to spend the next part of their lives with the university and turning up for enrolment.'

In contrast to most information and induction activities, Matching is a more personal approach aimed at individual students' self-reflection and at helping them compare their expectations with a programme's content, its teaching philosophy and the required skills. Matching can help prospective students in three ways: by reassuring those students who have already made their choice, by helping students who are still in doubt between different programmes to make an informed study choice, and, finally, by giving initial advice to students who are likely to encounter challenges.

Matching in the BA ES

The BA ES started preparations for Matching in early 2010. Beyond wanting to help prospective students to make an informed study choice, our initial aims were threefold: to stabilise the amount of incoming students, to raise retention rates and to achieve higher completion rates. The first aim follows from the fact that cohorts in the BA ES have been growing fast since the inception of the programme in 2002, with 410 new students starting in September 2010. This resulted in several practical challenges, ranging from limited availability of teaching rooms to increasing staff workload. The second and third aim are linked to agreements between the Dutch government and universities aimed at achieving higher retention and completion rates – both of which have actually been quite good for the BA ES, respectively between 70-75% and 80-85% on average. As a result, it became even more important to attract the 'right' students.

As mentioned earlier, other programmes in the Netherlands are now also in the process of setting up Matching arrangements and have opted for several forms. Some (also in Maastricht) ask that students complete a questionnaire, after which they get an automated response with feedback. The procedure stops there. Others have opted for full day events (including test exams) for bigger groups of students. We have opted for a more personal approach, with a questionnaire, and when deemed necessary, complemented by an individual interview. All students receive personalised feedback on their questionnaire. This decision was based on the fact that research on recruitment, admission and induction, and on first-year experience in more general terms, has shown that a more personal approach helps in transition to university by making students feel welcome and at home (e.g. Briggs et al. 2012; Christie et al. 2008; Trotter and Roberts 2006).

Our Matching procedure has been designed as an aid for making an appropriate study choice by having applicants investigate the basis of their decision to sign up (cf. Brinkworth et al. 2009; Kmett et al. 1999). Through stimulating self-reflection we hope that students become more aware of the new life ahead of them and the accompanying responsibilities, as well as of what they should bring to university. By identifying potential problems at an earlier stage we are able to offer students advice and support. As such, we believe that Matching can have an added value compared to entrance exams and other activities in the field of student selection and induction.

Matching was developed in close cooperation with colleagues from our sister programme Arts and Culture, housed in the same faculty. Programme directors and student advisers were closely involved in this process. This way two perspectives were brought in: on the one hand, programme content and expectations; on the other hand, study skills and motivation. Students and staff of the BA ES were asked for feedback. In addition, we consulted with colleagues from the University of Amsterdam's Bachelor in Media and Culture, which was already applying an early form of Matching. A native speaker was involved in order to prevent potential language issues.

Procedure and questionnaire

Applicants are invited to complete the Matching questionnaire shortly after they have applied for the programme. The questionnaire contains different sets of questions that were drafted taking into account insights from existing research on the role of information and induction activities (e.g. Trotter and Roberts 2006), learning environment (e.g. Christie et al. 2008), skills (e.g. Jansen and Suhre 2010) and social background (e.g. Leveson et al. 2013) in transition to higher education. For instance, intending to work for a substantial amount of hours or having to travel to get to classes may lead to challenges (e.g. Brinkworth et al. 2009: 169), so we have included related questions in the questionnaire.

Such insights were then linked to the programme's five main characteristics. For one, Maastricht's BA ES has an interdisciplinary nature. This is reflected not only in the offered courses, but also by the fact that they are jointly developed and 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, including European integration, cultural and religious fault lines and European history. Third, the programme combines these diverse disciplines and perspectives in a coherent curriculum, with all but a few elective courses being offered in the third year. A fourth characteristic concerns the fact that the BA ES builds on Problem-Based Learning (PBL). Supported by a tutor, students are responsible for shaping the learning process in groups of maximum 15 individuals. They are expected to actively present and discuss their own ideas with their peers. Contact hours are limited to approximately 10 hours per week, meaning that there is a lot of emphasis on self-study (e.g. Maurer and Neuhold 2014). The final characteristic of the BA ES is that it is fully taught in English. We expect our prospective students to have a level of English comparable to level C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, even though we are not allowed to use this as a selection criterion.

The questionnaire intends to make applicants reflect on their study choice and to help them decide whether or not the BA ES is the right choice for them. The questionnaire contains both closed and open questions, with the latter not only being linked to motivation and expectations, but also aimed at getting a better insight in applicants' writing skills and English language proficiency level. There are general questions about, for instance, a student's background and previous education, as well as more specific questions that address the aforementioned programme-specific issues. For instance, when it comes to expectations, we ask prospective students to first name two contemporary issues they are interested in and, second, to explain how they think that the BA ES can help them to better understand these issues. Another example concerns skills, where we raise specific questions related to PBL, such as whether or not students like to engage in active discussion. After all, research suggests that an affiliation with the learning environment is imperative for a student's chances of success (e.g. Christie et al. 2008).

Based on prior experience and training, completed questionnaires are read by a member of the Matching team, consisting of academic staff and the student adviser. We look at whether or not applicants can *develop* into successful students and, if required, what could be done to facilitate this development. The software currently in use does not allow us to purposefully automate this step in the Matching process, which is partly due to the included open questions. Yet, we have also come to the conclusion that self-reflection requires does not just depend on the way the questionnaire has been set-up, but also requires us to adopt a personal approach when communicating with prospective students.

After our assessment of a completed questionnaire, the prospective student receives a status, either 'OK', 'Pending' or 'NOK'. The OK status is given when it is believed that a prospective student's expectations match with what the programme has on offer and her competences potentially enable her to fulfil the programme's requirements. She receives an email outlining as much, welcoming her

to the programme and inviting her to the introduction days. Applicants 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, but may also refer to expectations regarding the content of the programme.

The status NOK usually implies that the questionnaire brought up more than one potentially problematic issue. Applicants who are put on NOK receive an invitation to a compulsory interview in Maastricht. In special cases, we do offer the opportunity for a skype-interview, yet most applicants actually come to Maastricht. Interviews last approximately 20-30 minutes and follow the protocol in table 1. They are meant as a follow-up to the questionnaire, meaning that we only focus on items that we would like to discuss further and not on the complete questionnaire. The interview offers a particularly good occasion to further explore dispositional factors, such as interest and motivation. It also specifically aims at self-reflection on part of the applicants. After the interview is over, the applicant's status is changed to either 'OK after interview' or 'NOK after interview' (hereafter abbreviated as respectively OK/interview and NOK/interview). The first results in an email that invites the applicant to the introduction days and may still contain some piece of advice. The second results in an email advising to reconsider the study choice.

Table 1: Set-up interviews

a.	Programme director (or student adviser) welcomes applicant and thanks her for coming to Maastricht, provides Matching background and stresses the importance of the advice.
b.	First question: '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 ability to self-reflect. The invitation to the interview, in fact, only generally refers to a potential mismatch.
c.	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 applicants present new information. The questions are meant to facilitate dialogue and to get a better insight into someone's background, skills, motivation and expectations.
d.	The applicant also gets a chance to ask questions she may still have. This may actually be relevant in terms of formulating advice; questions often confirm our impression that a student does – or does not – have a good insight into the BA ES.
e.	Last question, again aimed at self-reflection: 'what will you take away with you from this interview?' .It is hoped that the applicant can formulate the conclusion herself.
f.	To conclude, the applicant receives advice, although in some cases this is not done immediately due to the need to further reflect on the interview.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

Basic data about the outcomes of Matching is gathered annually and students are asked to evaluate the process. This input is then used to further improve the process. As a result, the questionnaire has been changed almost every year. In other words, the discussion below is not the result of a statistical

exercise in which all variables were kept constant and that was inspired by theoretical questions. Yet, it does illustrate that some themes turn out to be important each time. As such, our experience will be interesting for other researchers and programmes considering activities regarding the pre-induction phase.

On the one hand, the data we have been gathering looks at how students have performed, based on their Matching status; at their Grade Point Average (GPA) and at how many credits (commonly named ECTS – European Credit Transfer System) they received at the end of the year. On the other hand, we have looked at the predictive value of individual questions on the questionnaire, again by linking answers to achieved credits and average grade. It is important to note that we will not focus on the correlation between answers to questions. This is partly due to the fact that our research first and foremost was intended to help improve Matching, although, the fact that our cohorts are very heterogeneous in terms of nationality also played a role. The last part of this section will focus on changes we made to facilitate transition to higher education based on this initial data and our experience with Matching.

Matching process and 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 applicants that actually started their studies in the respective academic years. Two conclusions can be drawn from these figures. First, it shows that applicants decide not to pursue their studies in Maastricht at all stages of the process. For instance, when looking at the first cohort, we see that 201 applicants did not even complete the questionnaire; of the people that did complete the questionnaire another 100 also withdrew their application. To us this suggests that Matching does indeed stimulate self-reflection and self-selection. Second, the figures show that our aim to stabilise the size of our cohorts has been met, despite the increasing number of applicants.

Table 2: Matching status before interview

	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
Applied	680	694	861
Completed	479 (70.44%)	493 (71.04%)	539 (62.60%)
Intake OK	250	143	126
Intake Pending	79	96	77
Intake NOK	150	254	336
Started	379 (55.74%)	366 (52.74%)	361 (41.93%)

Only few applicants withdrew after the interview, in spite of having been advised to reconsider their study choice. While we have not yet done specific research into this matter, we suspect that many decided to start due to our personal approach. They had already developed an affiliation with the BA ES, through Matching in general, and the interview in particular, which many reported as being pleasant. For instance, responding to the (anonymous) evaluation questionnaire for 2013/2014, a

student wrote that (s)he liked that ‘the faculty was trying to approach us in a ‘human way’ (...) showing us that it cared about the students who applied’.

Table 3: Matching outcome versus study results

	Status	N	Average GPA (SD)	Average ECTS (SD)
2011/2012*	Intake OK	203	6,69 (1,50)	48,65 (18,48)
	Intake Pending	65	5,81 (1,74)	41,53 (22,00)
	Intake NOK	105	5,36 (2,10)	35,03 (23,97)
2012/2013*	Intake OK	118	6,62 (1,67)	48,11 (18,22)
	OK/interview	105	6,23 (1,74)	46,05 (19,72)
	Intake Pending	81	6,23 (1,63)	44,27 (19,70)
	NOK/interview	62	5,51 (1,81)	37,74 (21,82)
2013/2014**	Intake OK	99	6,53 (1,74)	19,29 (6,87)
	OK/interview	142	5,97 (1,66)	16,80 (7,75)
	Intake Pending	52	6,36 (1,99)	18,70 (7,56)
	NOK/interview	65	4,77 (2,23)	11,90 (9,23)

* Results at the end of year 1

** Results after 2 out of 5 course periods

As shown in table 3, the comparison of Matching data with study results suggests that the impression a student makes through the questionnaire (and, when applicable, the interview) provides an indication of their chances of successfully studying the BA ES. The data for 2011/2012 shows that, with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 6.69¹ and a total number of 48.65 ECTS², the students that received the OK status on average performed much better than the two other groups. Also, the Pending students performed better better than the NOK students.

In 2012/2013 we introduced the OK/interview and NOK/interview categories so as to be able to better differentiate between the students that have to come for an interview. 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/interview group outperforms the NOK/interview group. In other words, the introduction of the new statuses seems to lead to a more accurate picture.

Currently we do not yet have complete study progress data for the 2013/2014 cohort, but based on data collected after 2 out of 5 periods we already could see that the OK group seemed to be outperforming the other groups. There was, however, a marked difference between the Pending and OK/interview groups, with, compared to last years' results, the latter doing less well than the Pending group. Yet, as will be shown below, general data about this cohort after their first year shows that many students eventually made it to the second year.

While table 3 just shows how the students performed, table 4 goes a step further by comparing the different status groups, in particular how the OK and OK/interview students performed vis-à-vis the NOK and NOK/interview students. The data show that there is a significant correlation, with the different OK groups consistently outperforming the NOK groups. This confirms that our expectations in terms of student performance were largely met. Still, it remains difficult to exactly predict how a cohort and its subgroups will perform. After all, there are many other factors that influence students' study progress, including external factors beyond the control of university (e.g. Leveson et al. 2013). For instance, 39 out of the 203 OK students of the 2011/2012 cohort received an n-BSA at the end of the year.

Table 4: Least significant difference post-hoc analysis

Dependent variable	I (Matching status)	J (Matching status)	Mean difference (I-J)	P-value
2011/2012**				
GPA	Intake OK	Intake NOK	1,33*	0,000
ECTS	Intake OK	Intake NOK	13,61*	0,000
2012/2013**				
GPA	Intake OK	NOK/interview	1,11*	0,000
	OK/interview	NOK/interview	0,72*	0,009
ECTS	Intake OK	NOK/interview	10,37*	0,001
	OK/interview	NOK/interview	8,31*	0,009
2013/2014***				
GPA	Intake OK	NOK/interview	1,76*	0,000
	OK/interview	NOK/interview	1,20*	0,000
ECTS	Intake OK	NOK/interview	7,39*	0,000
	OK/interview	NOK/interview	4,90*	0,000

*p < 0,05

** Results at the end of year 1

*** Results after 2 out of 5 course periods

One of the main aims behind Matching was to increase retention rates. After just three years of Matching it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions, also because other factors may be involved. In fact, the academic literature is not conclusive on this matter. Some studies that suggest that activities aimed at better transition can lead to higher retention rates (e.g. Richardson and Tate 2013), but there are also studies that report hardly any changes (e.g. Verbeek et al. 2011). As table 5 shows, retention rates do seem to be on the increase for the BA ES. In addition, fewer students have received an n-BSA. A final, interesting, observation concerns the finding that relatively few students drop out despite having received a p-BSA: 0 per cent of 2011/2012 and 2 per cent of the 2012/2013 cohorts, as

compared to more than 10 per cent of the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 pre-Matching cohorts. This seems to imply that those students who eventually started the programme were those that were really convinced of their study choice. We are as yet unable to draw a similar conclusion for the 2013/2014 cohort due to the fact that we do not yet have complete data.

Table 5: N-BSA and retention rates Matching cohorts

	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
Started	379	366	361
N-BSA	74 (19.5%)	69 (18.8%)	57 (15.7%)
In year 2	276 (72.8%)	275 (75.1%)	57 (15.7%)

Individual variables, study progress and the additional value of interviews

We also want to highlight important issues that were often raised during interviews, even though they do not always seem to have predictive value.³ These issues are often related to dispositional factors that have thus far only been explored to a limited extent by other studies, even though research suggests that they can influence a student's chances of study success (e.g. Bowles et al. 2014; Christie et al. 2008; Gale and Parker 2014). Quite a few of these issues also tend to be only addressed to a limited extent in other procedures. It is here that we believe that Matching in general and the interviews in particular have an added value.

When looking at prior education, the predictability of secondary school grades is something where other studies suggest that the higher the average grade at the end of secondary school, the better the chances of study success (e.g. Bruinsma and Jansen 2009). However, our research presents a less straightforward picture, which can partly be explained by the heterogeneity of our 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, the Matching questionnaire only asks for detailed grades from sizable nationalities.⁴ 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.⁵

Yet, even when looking at a single nationality, problems remain. The final English grade of Belgian students represents a telling example. This indicator has so far proven not to be predictive at all, yet completed questionnaires often raise doubts about the English proficiency level of the students in question. We believe that this ambiguity can partly be explained by the fact that, as especially our French speaking Belgian students tend to explain during the interview, English was taught in their native language at high school. As such, a high grade does not necessarily reflect the actual English language proficiency level and their active knowledge of the English language (cf. Maiworm and Wächter 2002).

A counter example concerns students that were previously enrolled for another programme in higher education, but without completing it, who 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 have wrong expectations, which, for instance, concerns the belief that programmes in higher education are similarly structured, require the same skills and apply the same rules. A second reason concerns the lack of certain invaluable study skills, as well as more general academic problems, including procrastination and fear

of failure. In these kinds of cases the interview has an added value in helping applicants to reflect upon where it went wrong before and to explore what can be done to prevent the same thing from happening again (cf. Assiter and Gibbs 2007 on motivational factors).

This brings us to the important issue of skills. Yorke and Longden (2004: 114) remark that students who drop out often refer to lacking certain study skills. 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 academic skills (especially reading and writing). They choose one out of four possible answers: disagree fully, disagree partly, agree partly and agree fully. The lower applicants' self-reported score on these items, the lower their average number of acquired ECTS and GPA. It is on these types of issues that we can provide advice. For instance, if applicants indicate that they are not good at time management, they are advised to take a study efficacy course at the university's Student Service Centre.

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 they have had such experience (summer job, voluntary work, and other work experience). If yes, they 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 applicants reflect on their study choice. They also help to put the self-reported skills scores in perspective, for instance, when a student's response to the statement 'I am good at time management' is 'agree partly', while also writing about how a demanding job helped her to become better at planning.

Whether or not students have already acquired work experience appears not to be predictive. What did turn out to be predictive is the length of the answers to the related open questions. In fact, our data indicate that the longer the answers to *all* open questions in the questionnaire taken together, the better the students perform. Of course, this suggests that students took the questionnaire seriously. However, we also assume that, since writing is a key component of many programmes in social sciences and the humanities such as the BA ES, eloquent writing skills and even a degree of pleasure in writing are important. The length of the answers to the open questions seems to be an indication of this. In fact, we have observed that shorter answers are regularly combined with applicants 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. Finally, shorter answers are often combined with a poorer English proficiency level.

Issues such as these also raise questions about how students have informed themselves before signing up for the programme. Were they unaware of the fact that they have to write a lot? 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, 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 applicants who did not attend an open day, tend to lack certain knowledge about key characteristics of our programme, both in terms of content and required skills. The case of students who dropped out from a previous programme in higher education is once again telling. In quite a few cases these students indicate that the previous programme did not meet their expectations, yet despite this they did little to prepare for their new study choice. This is especially the case for those coming from another faculty of Maastricht University.

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 also have no predictive value it seems. During interviews applicants who 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 up for another programme as a back-up in case of a negative outcome of the Matching procedure.

Finally, we also ask applicants if they have a dream job or a more precise career orientation. Our data is not conclusive on whether or not this influences study success, nor is this confirmed by other research (e.g. McKenzie and Schweitzer 2001: 23, 27). Yet, what we do notice during interviews, is that students who have no idea about future careers have a much tougher time explaining why the BA ES is a good choice for them than students who do have clearer future perspectives.

Adjustments inspired by Matching

Based on the data presented above and the experience gathered until now, we have made changes to not only the Matching procedure itself, but also to the wider transition. To start with, we have made changes to the questionnaire. Some of these changes concerned the order of the questions and the information that precedes them. Yet, we have also introduced new questions, such as the ones on work experience and reasons to quite a previous higher education programme, both mentioned above. We have also removed questions that turned out to have no added value in terms of both the questionnaire and the interview, such as questions where students had to list their three main reasons for deciding to opt for the BA ES. Such changes have helped us gain a better insight into students' study choice and have helped to further streamline the assessment of the questionnaires, as well as the interviews.

Other procedure related changes concern our communication with students, the best example of which is the email that we send to students who are advised to reconsider their study choice. Before 2013/2014, this 'NOK/interview' email contained an ambiguous message: an advice to reconsider, but, should the applicant still decide to come, an invitation to the introduction days. Since then, this email has been rephrased to make it more the point, just mentioning the advice to reconsider and the reasons why. Whereas in 2012/2013 only a handful of applicants withdrew after a 'NOK/interview', just over a quarter did after this change was implemented.

Matching has also inspired broader programme-related changes and changes related to other phases of the transition process. We have revised our open days following feedback from the students who attended our interviews. For one, more emphasis is put on what the programme expects from its students and on the most common challenges our students tend to encounter, not just on what the programme is about. In addition, we now also host separate sessions for parents, who have an important influence on study choice (e.g. Briggs 2006: 709; Yorke and Longden 2004: 136-137). Students that were interviewed increasingly mentioned their parents' role in making a study choice – for better or worse. The BA ES website has also been upgraded, with, for instance, more information about PBL and a clearer student profile.⁶

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. We now have a two-day introduction programme that is organised at the start of the academic year. The first day is meant to welcome students in a friendly atmosphere, with only limited attention to academic issues. Students meet their peers from the first tutor group, as well as their 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 and about other important issues (for example, faculty rules and regulations). In fact, the mentor programme itself is a novelty that was introduced at the start of Matching and that has been further developed since. The first year focuses

on individual mentoring aimed at helping students to 'survive' their first year of studies. Subsequent years devote attention to issues such as internships, studying abroad, and how to write a final Bachelor Paper.

We have also introduced a diagnostic English language test. Interviews often made it clear that some students were in danger of making a bad start because they struggled with the English language – something that has also been experienced by other programmes in higher education that are fully taught in English (e.g. Maiworm and Wächter 2002; Murray 2013). This multiple-choice test, developed together with the university's Language Centre, tests the English proficiency level of new students at the start of the programme. The lowest scoring 20 per cent 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 advice on how to improve their English language proficiency.⁷

CONCLUSION

Most students tend to positively comment on Matching. They often remark that the questionnaire makes them reflect on their study choice and makes feel 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.' (Jansen 2012). Further development and improvements are, however, 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 Matching procedure and the questionnaire. One issue that is currently high on our agenda concerns time investment. Other studies advise that active involvement of programme managers and 'designated school or college staff who have year-on-year responsibility' is important for a successful transition to higher education (Briggs et al. 2012: 12). This is currently the case, but also leads to higher costs. How can we adapt Matching in such a way as to make it more (time) efficient, while maintaining its key strengths?

Analysing a large pilot project in the Netherlands – the results of which appeared after we started the Matching procedure – Verbeek et al. (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 applicants, and tend to lead to better results, even though there does not appear to be an immediate positive effect on retention rates. Based on our findings, we would agree with this qualified conclusion. We developed Matching with three aims in mind: to stabilise the number of incoming students, to increase retention and completion rates and to offer an additional service to applicants. As regards the first aim, self-reflection on part of the applicants seems to lead to withdrawal, especially at early stages of the process, thus leading to a stabilisation of the size of incoming cohorts. So far, it appears that retention rates are on the increase, if only slightly, although at this stage it is premature to draw definitive conclusion on this matter. Even so, there is earlier engagement between programme and student, which seems to ease transition, and students appear to be more aware of the transitions that they will be going through (new study, new responsibilities, new life). This does seem to have had an impact on the composition of the group of students who dropout. Finally, while this article focussed on first-year experience, we are, in fact, as yet also unable to draw conclusions as regards the aim to increase completion rates. At the time of writing, the first cohort is still in the process of completing their studies.

We will continue gathering more detailed data and feedback to be able to gain a better understanding of the role of Matching as part of the transition from secondary school to higher education and, in a few years, to be able to draw conclusions regarding the influence of Matching on completion rates. In

terms of further research we are also considering two lines of enquiry. First, while we know that students drop out at various stages of the Matching procedure, we know little about their reasons for doing so. Yet, this information could lead to a better insight into the actual impact of Matching on study choice. Second, we would like to find out why students that were expected to fail, actually turn out to perform well, and vice versa. We would like to know more about the specific factors that influence our students, especially the aim of further improving the predictive potential of Matching.

In sum, further research is certainly needed for us to be able to draw definitive conclusions regarding the exact impact of Matching. Even so, it has proven to be a positive experience in terms of getting to grips with students' transition to university and filling the gap between information and induction activities. Therefore, we are convinced that other programmes could also benefit from Matching.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in the 2013 NACADA and PSA-BISA conferences and the 2014 Teaching and Learning Conference in Maastricht, as well as Sylvia Haerkens and Heidi Maurer, for comments on earlier versions of this article. Thanks also go to Tim Hacking and Arjan Schakel for their invaluable contribution to data gathering and analysis. Finally, many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed feedback and helpful suggestions.

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¹ On a 1-10 grading scale, where a 10 is the highest possible grade and a 6 a passing grade.

² Our students need to obtain a minimum of 42 ECTS to be able to continue their studies.

³ Detailed data is available on request.

⁴ Note that the central registration office requests grade transcripts from all applicants to be able to check whether they are admissible to our programme.

⁵ In fact, even within one country different grading scales may apply, as is the case in Germany.

⁶ See:

<http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Faculties/FASoS/TargetGroups/ProspectiveStudents/BachelorsProgrammes/EuropeanStudies2.htm> (last accessed 10 November 2014).

⁷ Interestingly, many students who have to attend the language interview have previously been warned about the level of their English during Matching.

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