



Presteren op vreemde bodem. Een onderzoek naar sociale hulpbronnen en de leeromgeving als studiesuccesfactoren voor niet-westerse allochtone studenten in het Nederlandse hoger onderwijs (1997-2010)

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English summary

Educational success is of key importance in the integration process for ethnic minority communities. Education is the pre-eminent domain for ethnic minority young people to develop as individuals who can participate in society as full-fledged citizens. Higher education has a special position in this process. Firstly, for ethnic minority young adults themselves: a higher education diploma offers the best opportunities on the labour market. Secondly, highly educated young people of ethnic minority descent have the potential to occupy important positions in society and to be role models for their communities. Thirdly, higher education can be considered a test case for an education system as a whole. Is this system, for example the Dutch education system, well enough equipped to offer young adults of non-Western ethnic minority background¹ and of ethnic majority (Dutch White) background the same opportunities to reach and to participate in higher education and to be successful on this highest stage of education?

In this dissertation I have focused on finding answers to the following questions:

- 1. How have dropout and completion rates of students of non-Western ethnic minority background developed compared to those of ethnic majority students in Dutch Higher Education during the period 1997-2010?*
- 2. Are differences in study success between students of non-Western ethnic minority background and ethnic majority students related to background characteristics (for example ethnic background or preparatory schooling)?*
- 3. What is the role of social resources in study success of students of non-Western ethnic minority background?*

The study success of ethnic minority students (students of non-Western ethnic minority background) was examined from different perspectives. Firstly, dropout and completion rates of both the ethnic minority and ethnic majority student groups were compared and analysed using national higher education databases (the public database of Statistics Netherlands (CBS) – Statline and a database of the “Informatie Beheer Groep” (who were recently incorporated into the Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs in the Netherlands)). Secondly, I formulated possible explanations for differences in study success between groups, based on the theoretical concepts of social and academic integration and cultural, social and economic capital. Thirdly, I collected qualitative data to examine a) to what extent the process of study choice and higher education experiences of ethnic minority and ethnic majority students differ, b) why some ethnic minority students dropout, while others continue studying and c) which factors within learning environments influence differences in study success between the groups of ethnic minority and ethnic majority students. Further, qualitative data focused on the social contacts of students a) while choosing a study and b) within the learning environment and whether these contacts serve as social resources to be a successful student. By connecting characteristics and experiences of students with characteristics of the learning environment and experiences of teaching and student support staff, a broad analysis on study success of ethnic minority students was possible.

The Statistic Netherlands/StatLine database contains group level data on ethnic background, migrant generation, gender, discipline of study and preparatory schooling. These data generated the following findings. Firstly, the composition of educational cohorts has become more and more diverse within period studied. The number of first year students from ethnic minority backgrounds has grown from some 7.200 students in cohort 1997/98 to more than 20.000 in cohort 2009/10. This represents a

¹ In the Netherlands people of Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, Antillean/Aruban or ‘other non-Western’ origin (roughly all countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia with the exception of Japan and Indonesia) are defined as non-Western ethnic minorities. A person belongs to a non-Western group when at least one of his/her parents is born in one of these countries (definition: Statistics Netherlands).

growth in the share of ethnic minorities in the population of first year students from eight to over 14% per cent over the study period. This growth is mainly caused by the rising number of students in the group 'Other non-Western' (where the largest subgroups consist of students with ethnic backgrounds from China/Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan or Vietnam), especially in university education². The other non-Western student groups have also become larger, and at a faster pace than the group of ethnic majority students.

Second, the composition of the group of first year ethnic minority students differs from that of the group ethnic majority students on several points. On average, ethnic minority students take longer preparatory schooling tracks than ethnic majority students before entering higher education. As a result, they enter higher education with delay and at an older age than ethnic majority students. Ethnic majority students enter higher education more often through the senior general secondary education track (havo) and pre-university education track (vwo), which are the fastest routes to reach Dutch higher education, while ethnic minority students more often enter via secondary vocational education (mbo), especially students of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese background. A large majority of the Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese students are second generation (70 to 80 per cent are born in the Netherlands). The majority of the Antillean/Aruban students and of students from 'Other non-Western' backgrounds are first generation migrants. Furthermore, ethnic minority students choose studies in the disciplines of economics and law more often than ethnic majority students.

Third, with lower dropout rates and higher completion rates, ethnic majority students have more study success than ethnic minority students. The difference in dropout rates is a few percentage points. Differences in completion rates however are much larger, in some cases up to 20 percentage points or more for both higher professional education (hbo) and university education (wo).

Fourth, there are clear differences in study success between ethnic minority groups. The student group 'Other non-Western' is most successful. Dropout rates are lowest and completion rates are highest compared to those of other ethnic minority groups. Students from Antillean/Aruban background perform least successful. Their dropout rates are highest and in university education their completion rates are lowest. The greatest problem for the Moroccan group concerns dropout behaviour. And in university education this group seems to split up in two: one group being very successful and graduating quickly, while another drops out or is confronted with significant study delays.

Fifth, in general, the gap in study success between ethnic majority and ethnic minority students does not close in the period 1997-2010. In hbo the differences in dropout rates remains the same. The gap in completion rates between the ethnic majority (very stable at some 66-67 per cent after six years of study) and the Turkish group and the group 'Other non-Western' is closing due to an increase of completion rates of the two ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, completion rates of the Antillean/Aruban group decreased in the period analysed. In university education, dropout rates of Moroccan and Surinamese students are increasing, resulting in a wider gap with the ethnic majority group. Dropout rates of Antillean/Aruban students are high compared to other groups. Completion rates in university education have increased for almost all ethnic groups. As a consequence, the gap in completion rates between ethnic minority groups and the ethnic majority group remains unchanged. An exception is the group 'Other non-Western' where completion rates have increased more compared to all other ethnic groups.

The IBG-data, that contains individual data on ethnic background, country of birth, gender, preparatory schooling, moment of entry (does a student enter higher education with delay in the preparatory track?), discipline of study and switch, show that the lower success rates of ethnic minority students is partly due to an overrepresentation of 'at risk'-students in this group, such as students who reach higher education with delay and students who switch from course programs. Controlling for the other characteristics, there is also a relationship between ethnic background on the one hand and dropout and graduation on the other: ethnic majority students demonstrate a lower probability of dropout and higher chance of graduating compared to ethnic minority students. In higher professional education the odds of Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese and Antillean/Aruban students still studying after two years are some 80% – for the group 'Other non-Western' 90% – of

² Dutch higher education comprises higher professional education (HBO) and university education (WO).

that of ethnic majority students. The odds of Surinamese students graduating after six years of study are less than half, of Moroccan students and the group 'Other non-Western' (the best performing ethnic minority groups) some 60% of that of majority students. In university education the odds of Turkish and Surinamese students still studying after two years are some 55% of that of majority students, while the odds for the other non-Western groups are not significant. The odds of Surinamese students graduating after seven years are 37%, of Antillean/Aruban students (the best performing majority group) some 60% of that of majority students.

The national databases used do not contain data on the social economic background of students. Consequently, analysis of these databases cannot answer the question to what extent the lesser study success of ethnic minority students is caused by an overrepresentation of students from lower social economic background. However, other studies show that ethnic background remains related to study success, controlling for (indicators of) social economic background and that the role of social economic background differs between ethnic groups.

An interesting finding is that preparatory schooling and discipline of study are more related to chances of dropout and graduation among ethnic majority students than ethnic minority students. Does study success for ethnic minority and ethnic majority students depend on different factors? Are there factors in the education offered that cause these differences? Results concerning study switch also raise questions. Why do ethnic minority hbo-students switch more frequently compared to ethnic majority hbo-students? Are there differences in the process of study choice? Or do ethnic minority students have different higher education experiences, resulting in a larger group of switch students?

How can differences in study success between different ethnic student groups be explained from a theoretical perspective? A good starting point is Tinto's theoretical concepts of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). Tinto poses that students with better formal and informal contacts with peer students, teaching staff and student support staff are more integrated into the social and academic systems of their learning environments, which increases the chances of success. However, Tinto's theory is too generic to explain why differences in processes of academic and social integration are observed between groups of students.

Extending Tinto's theory to make the model more concrete, Nora (2004) states that the more the value system of a student fits within the institutional culture, the more confident this student is and the stronger his/her sense of belonging. This will have a positive effect on study success. The next question then becomes: why does one student 'fit' better within the institution than another?

An answer to this question is sought in the theory of capital – specifically: cultural, social and economic capital. Cultural capital, as elaborated by Bourdieu (1997), refers to 'knowledge of the norms, styles, conventions, and tastes that pervade specific social settings and allow individuals to navigate them in ways that increase their odds of success' (see: Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2002, p.6). Social capital, according to Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988), refers in our case to relations and contacts that are relevant to achieve study success. Economic capital refers to material means that facilitate the study process.

Cultural and social capital can play a role in the process of choosing a study. For example, young people with highly educated parents find it more natural to go into higher education than young people with lesser educated parents and highly educated parents are better equipped to prepare their children for higher education – can transfer more cultural capital – than lesser educated parents. Furthermore, future students with a social network that is able to support them in choosing a study, for example because this network contains a large amount of higher education experience, are more likely, through a more focused study choice process, to find a better fitting study than future students who lack such social capital.

During the study process, students whose cultural capital is recognized and positively valued within the institution (fits the 'institutional habitus' (see Thomas, 2002)) will feel more accepted as full-fledged members of their learning communities, compared to students who lack this recognition. As a consequence, these students will have more social capital relevant to their study success at their disposal, and will integrate better into the academic and social systems of their institution. This process will be further facilitated for students in possession of enough economic capital for their livelihood.

In Bourdieu's view social class plays the most important part in the above described processes. However, these processes can also be related to other characteristics, such as ethnic background. In this case, the assumption is that ethnic majority students identify to a greater extent with (ethnic majority) teaching and student support staff (and vice versa) than ethnic minority students. This has consequences for interactions within the learning environment, the availability of social resources, processes of social and academic integration and ultimately for the degree of success.

The qualitative research data show the importance of social capital when comparing dropout and retention among ethnic minority students. In the process of study choice, students often seek advice of social resources (parents, other family members, friends (from school) and advisors at their secondary school) more than dropout students. During the study process, these students are more able than dropout students to build up a social network of fellow-students that is supportive and motivating and find it easier to approach teachers, tutors and student support staff. They also feel more 'at home' at their institution compared to dropout students. These findings confirm the hypotheses relating to social capital: social capital is positively related to academic and social integration, which are positively related to study success.

The above findings are based on students' perceptions alone. Another approach is to look at the design of learning environments and the learning environment in practice and examine how these influence a student's opportunities to obtain and use social capital. For this purpose I studied the first year learning environments of nine course programs (three university course programs, and six higher professional education course programs, of which three teacher training programs for primary education). Within six of these programs ethnic minority students performed poorer than ethnic majority students. However, within three course programs ethnic minority students performed – at least – as well as ethnic majority students. These three course programs stand out on the following points:

- Emphasis on directing students, for example teaching staff or student administration who compose project groups (instead of students who compose these groups themselves), a system of swift rotation in which students study with different peers each period and obligatory presence for many parts of the program.
- A personal approach towards students of an engaged teaching and student support staff, for example via an intensive student support system, and interest for the student's background from both the social and the didactical viewpoint.
- A small-scale design applied to all levels of the program, such as small project groups, teaching blocks (e.g. modules of ten weeks), a clear connection between subjects from different sections, and teachers that work together on an interdisciplinary basis, promoting the collaboration between the different sections.

These three elements in a learning environment facilitate the acquisition and usage of social capital. The power of such an environment lies in the combined use of these three elements. When one of these elements is missing, balance seems lost and differences in study success between groups increase.

How did ethnic background relate to social and cultural capital according to the research data? Concerning social capital, ethnic majority respondents do not report any experiences where their ethnic background played some roll in their contacts with fellow-students, teachers or student support staff. In contrast, ethnic minority respondents report that their ethnic background matters: regularly they are confronted with their ethnic background in their contacts with peers, teachers and student support staff (of mainly ethnic majority background). In some cases, respondents feel excluded by ethnic majority peers and treated unequally by teachers. These experiences partly explain why ethnic minority respondents seek company of especially other ethnic minority peers. The presence of these peers offers the opportunity to build up a social network. This network is useful if it contains knowledge on achieving study success. However, it is not clear if these networks are always of use in

this sense. A number of ethnic minority respondents hardly have any contacts with teachers and student support staff, because they find it hard to approach them. Within this context mastery of the Dutch language can be of extra hindrance: for example first generation Antillean/Aruban and Surinamese respondents experience their perceived deficiency of the Dutch language to obstruct interaction with teachers and student support staff.

The qualitative data on cultural capital offers a few additional insights into the relationship between cultural capital on one hand and academic preparation and support from the home environment on the other. Both ethnic minority and ethnic majority respondents receive this kind of support. However, there are some differences between these two groups.

Firstly, ethnic minority respondents receive content-based support to a lesser extent than ethnic majority respondents, both in the process of study choice and while studying. Secondly, for ethnic minority respondents the mental support from home is more often experienced as mental pressure to choose certain studies (this is a possible explanation of the large number of ethnic minority students in the disciplines of economics and law) and to perform. This perceived pressure (to perform) is for an important part rooted in the migration project of the family. Here, social mobility is formulated in terms of migration motives of parents. Among ethnic minority students with highly educated parents the pressure to perform is often strong because a higher education diploma confirms the family's status within their community. Ethnic majority respondents are more autonomous in choosing a study, experience less mental pressure from home and emphasize, more than ethnic minority respondents, that their parents mainly strive for their happiness.

Furthermore, within the ethnic minority group there are some differences in family support related to parental education. Ethnic minority respondents with highly educated parents know, because of their background, that study success is achievable. In contrast, ethnic minority respondents with lesser educated parents are more insecure about meeting the standards of higher education. Regularly, they compare their situation with that of ethnic majority students whose parents – in their perception – give their children more confidence that graduation is possible.

Concerning material support, which can be seen as a form of economic capital, differences are found among respondents who live away from home: ethnic minority students seem self sufficient to a greater extent which can result in lesser time to study.

Connecting findings on the relationship between ethnic background and social and cultural capital on the one hand with findings on facilitating social capital in the learning environment and differences in study success on the other, I formulate the following conclusions.

Study success of ethnic majority and ethnic minority students is more equal within learning communities that offer students equal opportunities to acquire and use social capital by offering their students direction from the start of the course program, small-scale education and a (socially) engaged team of teaching and student support staff. These communities are designed in such a way that differences in 'background-luggage' (cultural capital) which students carry with them entering higher education is of minor influence on achieving study success. In learning environments that offer ethnic majority and ethnic minority students equal opportunities to achieve study success, the role of ethnic background in processes of academic and social integration is neutralised. This is an important finding because many ethnic minority students have reached higher education from a different socio-geographical, -economical and -cultural context than ethnic majority students. Higher education is 'foreign ground' for many ethnic minority students, even if they are born in the Netherlands (the second generation). Less directive and large-scale learning communities, with much distance between students and teaching and student support staff, show large differences in study success between ethnic majority and ethnic minority students. In these communities ethnic background can play a negative role in interactions between ethnic minority students and ethnic majority students, teachers and student support staff, which can have negative consequences in acquiring the forms of social capital relevant for study success.

Elements in the learning environment that are related to differences in study success between ethnic minority and ethnic majority are of a generic form. Factors that go together with closing gaps in study success between groups are meant to offer all students equal opportunities to acquire social capital from the start, to integrate within the social and academic institutional systems and to achieve

study success. In other words, these are generic measures that are beneficial to specific groups, such as ethnic minority students. An important policy finding is that at least generic interventions are needed, focused on creating a context in which ethnic background is irrelevant for achieving study success, to close the gap in study success between ethnic minority and ethnic majority students.