Student counselling at Utrecht University*

PAUL G. P. HERFS
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract. The enormous increase in the number of students at Dutch universities in the sixties and seventies made it impossible for professors to deal with the many different questions students confronted them with. New professionals, student counsellors/psychologists and student advisers entered the universities. Three levels of counselling can be distinguished:

1) counselling by professors (for problems linked with the course of study);
2) counselling by student advisers in the faculty or department (for problems concerning study planning);
3) counselling by student counsellors/psychologists (for other - e.g., personal problems).

This article focuses on the activities of the student counsellors/psychologists.

Measures taken by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in the past ten years to cut down expenses created a severe deterioration of the students' situation (e.g., the limitation of the right to a grant from a period of six years in 1990 to a period of four years in 1996, the lowering of the donation part of the grant, and a restriction of the duration of the studies). As a consequence students feel they are under great pressure. Students therefore need to be well informed about rules and regulations. Counsellors try to limit "drop-out" rate as much as possible. Maintaining a high standard of facilities at Utrecht University (such as student counselling, a broad range of student societies and adequate information service) will be the challenge for the future.

A brief history of Utrecht University

Utrecht University is one of the thirteen Dutch universities and has deep historical roots. Its origins lie in the early Middle Ages and are linked closely with the history of Utrecht itself. Willibrordus, a missionary from the north of England, became the first bishop of Utrecht. He established a seminary in 700 AD for English missionaries, future priests and the sons of nobles. From the 11th century, the seminary was connected to the cathedral. This seminary, where initially only priests were educated, gradually broadened its curriculum to train administrators, lawyers, medical doctors, etc. From the 12th to the 16th centuries, Utrecht remained the intellectual and cultural centre of the Northern Netherlands. In 1579, the famed Union of Utrecht, the 'constitution' of the present Kingdom of the Netherlands, was signed in the large chapter

* I want to thank Nathan Deen, Anton van den Hoeven, Irene Jansen, Jeanette van Rees and Ruud Sluijs for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. I feel greatly indebted to Simone van den Berg who helped me to translate this article.
house which is now the university auditorium. The formal establishment of a university came about relatively late. It was not until 1634 that Utrecht established an "Illustrious School", and two years later the States of Utrecht officially declared the school a university. The opening took place on March 26, 1636. The official university had a staff of seven professors who taught in four different faculties, Theology, Law, Medicine and Philosophy. In 1815 the university became a state institution with five faculties. The faculty of Philosophy was split into two faculties: one comprising Mathematics and Physics, and the other consisting of Philosophy and Humanities. In 1925 the Veterinary School became the sixth faculty.

On its 355th anniversary in 1991, Utrecht University had over 24,000 students and employed about 400 professors, teaching in 14 different faculties. In January 1995 Utrecht University had 25,125 undergraduate students of which 58% were female (Utrecht University; 1995).

Utrecht and student facilities

The city of Utrecht and Utrecht University create a comfortable climate for students. Utrecht has a bustling student community, which offers many opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Utrecht has a lively city centre, various student societies and many sports and cultural facilities. Utrecht University believes that good student facilities are very important for a student's well-being. In 1994 and 1995 two major projects were completed, a new sports centre called "Olympos", situated in the university centre the "Uithof" and a new International and Cultural Centre, called "Parnassos", in the old city. This centre houses academics and students from abroad and also accommodates music and theatre facilities.

Student counselling on three different levels

In the sixties and seventies the number of students in Dutch universities grew enormously. Before World War II student counselling was provided by professors. Questions of students could be about curricula, study planning, examinations, personal problems, deferment of military service, etc. The growing number of students made it impossible for professors to answer all the questions students confronted them with. The increase in the number of students and their problems brought new employees to universities: student advisers, student psychologists, student counsellors, careers advisory officers and university medical officers. The main focus in this article lies on counselling activities of student counsellors and student psychologists of the department of Student Affairs. This focus does not mean that student counselling at Utrecht University is exclusively done by employees of a central department. Professors and student advisers within the faculties have of course guidance.