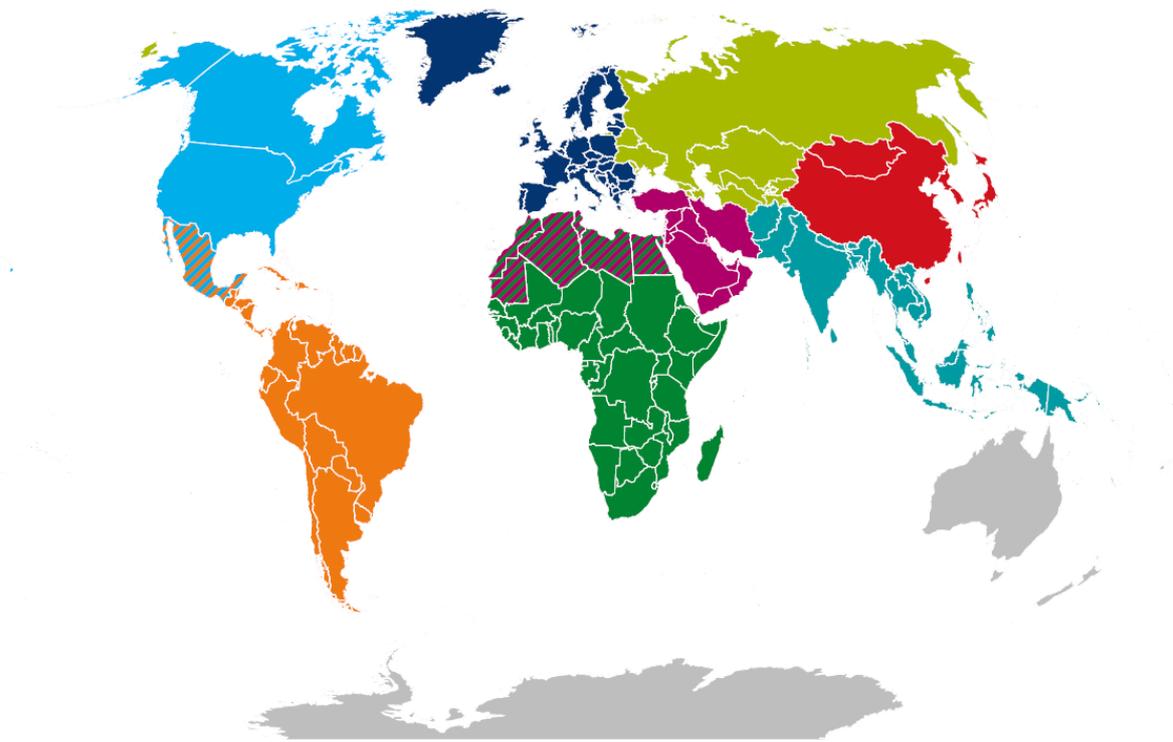


# Project Labour Market Preparation

## BA International Studies



Jaap Kamphuis



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## 1. Problem definition and goal of the project<sup>1</sup>

Bachelor's students at Dutch Universities are generally not satisfied with how their study programme prepares them for their future career, or do not see the relevance of their study programme for professional practice, as subsequent versions of the NSE (Dutch National Students Survey) indicate. Students of the Leiden University BA International Studies are even significantly less satisfied with the labour market preparation compared to their peers<sup>2</sup>, even though the programme offers its students much when it comes to labour market preparation. For example, in tutorials accompanying all core courses in the first two years of the study programme, transferable skills are extensively trained, there is an internship track for 30 credits, including a dedicated preparatory course Organizational Theory, Culture and Behaviour, and there is a unique consultancy project, constituting one of the two capstone projects of the programme, the other being the thesis. In short, there appears to be a difference in what the programme offers, or thinks it offers its student, and how students perceive that.

This is a problem both for the programme management and for the students. The programme management does not get across the message which skills they believe students should develop when they follow the curriculum and why these are useful and relevant to the labour market, while students have the idea that they do not develop the necessary skills to prepare them for their professional career. Moreover, given the general dissatisfaction amongst students with regards to labour market preparation, this is a problem that concerns the Faculty of Humanities, of which International Studies is a programme, and Leiden University as a whole. It is no coincidence that connection to the labour market preparation is one of the 8 ambitions of the Learning@Leiden vision on teaching and learning.

The goal of the present project is to ensure that International Studies has a suitable system of labour market preparation, that involves and activates students. To reach that goal the following issues need to be addressed:

1. In which way does the International Studies programme at the present prepare students for their future career?
2. What can we improve with regards to labour market preparation?
3. How can that be implemented in this rather complex programme?
4. How can we make students active participants of the labour market preparation, so that they experience what the programme can offer them in that regard?

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<sup>1</sup> The present report is the result of the input of many people (lecturers, Career Services, Coordinators of Studies, students and alumni) who gathered in various working groups, task forces and sounding boards. The programme is grateful for all their support. A special thanks is due to Marrit Terpstra who was responsible for building and analyzing the surveys, as well as for the organization of the various sounding board sessions.

<sup>2</sup> The actual difference is not that large, International Studies scores 2.75 on the 2018 NSE, while the average is about 3.0.



## 2. Method

The first step in the project consisted of setting up three surveys to gather more detailed data: one for current students, one for students who just graduated and one for alumni (see appendices). These surveys have been drawn up in consultation with the two International Studies university lecturers who have a special assignment with regards to labour market preparation: Sarita Koendjiharie and Maria Gabriela Palacio Ludeña.

The results of the survey have been discussed with the alumni- and the student sounding board. These meetings have also been used to discuss some of the issues students and alumni run into more in-depth and to come up with possible ways of tackling them.

The present labour market vision document has been drafted based on the results and the input from alumni and students.

This vision document has been discussed with the sounding board and subsequently with relevant stakeholders, after recommendations have been drawn up. The recommendations contain at least the following three elements: proposed changes, recommendations for implementation, recommendations for involving and activating students in the future.

As one of the goals is activation of the student and it is important to keep students informed with regards to the possibilities the International Studies programme provides in the field of labour market preparation, the recommendation contain advice on the way students can be activated to participate in labour market preparation and how the programme facilitates or incentivizes this.

A further step in the process is the participation of International Studies in the Leiden University Labour Market Preparation project, which will be an excellent way of starting up the implementation phase.



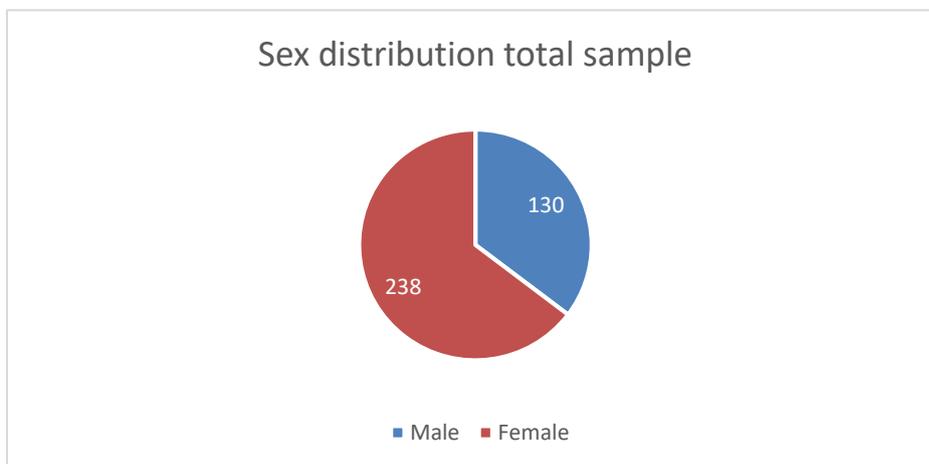
### 3. Analysis of the results of the surveys

#### 3.1 Introduction

Below the results of the survey are described and discussed. Where possible and necessary, comments from the sounding board sessions with students and alumni (including recent graduates) will be integrated into the discussion.

#### 3.2 Some indicators

We were satisfied with the number of students and alumni filling out the surveys. There were 154 student respondents, 69 recent (2018) graduates<sup>3</sup> and 163 alumni. The sex distribution of the total sample of respondents is very similar to the distribution in our programme, with about 2/3 female and 1/3 male:



*Figure 1. Sex distribution total sample*

Not only the sex distribution shows that we are dealing with a representative sample, the same is true for the area specialisation, see figure 2.:

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, recent graduates are also alumni of our programme, but we make this difference as many of the questions had to be phrased somewhat differently for the two groups, given the different time span these groups have spent on the labour market. Moreover, the recent graduates form an interesting group for comparison with alumni.

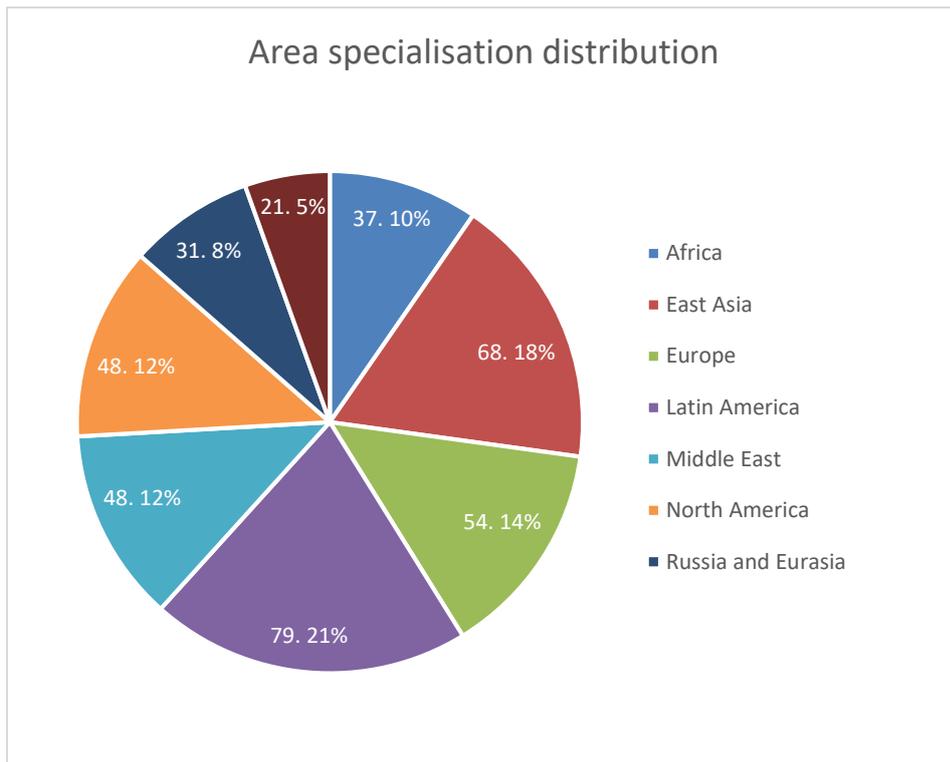


Figure 2. Area distribution total respondents.

### 3.3 Trends

The increase in the percentage of students taking an internship, of which we know that it is an important factor in the labour market preparation, shows when comparing alumni with recent graduates and current students:

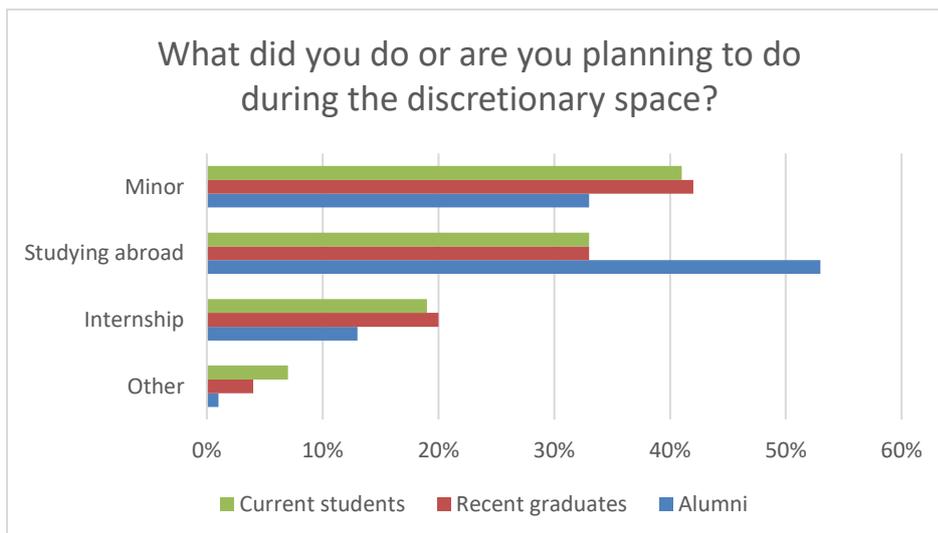


Figure 3. Comparison of choices in discretionary space<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In the meantime the “discretionary space” has been renamed “elective credits” for the new cohorts of students.

We believe this to be a positive trend. Students who have done an internship have gone through the motions of finding a job and have experienced what it means to use their skills in the labour market, often in a non-academic environment. There may be good reasons to go on exchange (e.g. get to experience the culture of a specific country), or do a minor (e.g. preparation for a master’s programme), but the internship track, which includes a research paper of 7000 words, may be the most interesting option both in terms of preparation of a professional career, as for those students who plan to do a master’s degree after graduating from the programme.

We also asked recent graduates and alumni what they did immediately after the BA International Studies:

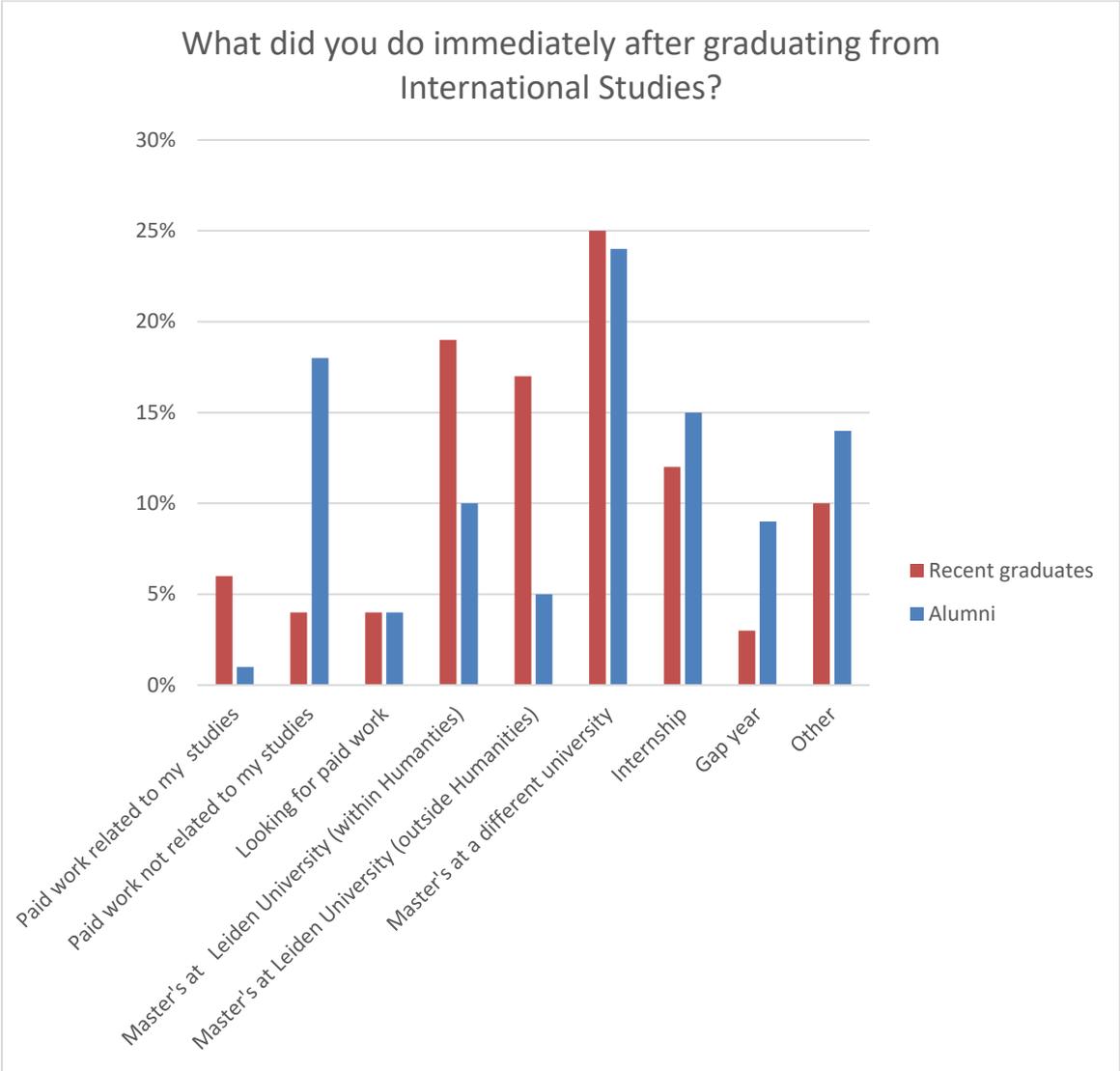


Figure 4. Next step after graduating from BA International Studies

The main difference here is the relative increase in students doing a master’s programme (39% alumni vs. 61% recent graduates). Apparently the earlier cohorts more often entered the labour market after their studies (19% vs 10%), chose to take an internship (15% vs 12%), a gap year (9% vs 3%) or something else (14% vs 10%). Of the alumni who engaged in paid work many had a job not related to their studies.

Finally, we inquired after the current occupation of our graduates and recent alumni and plotted that against their year of graduation:

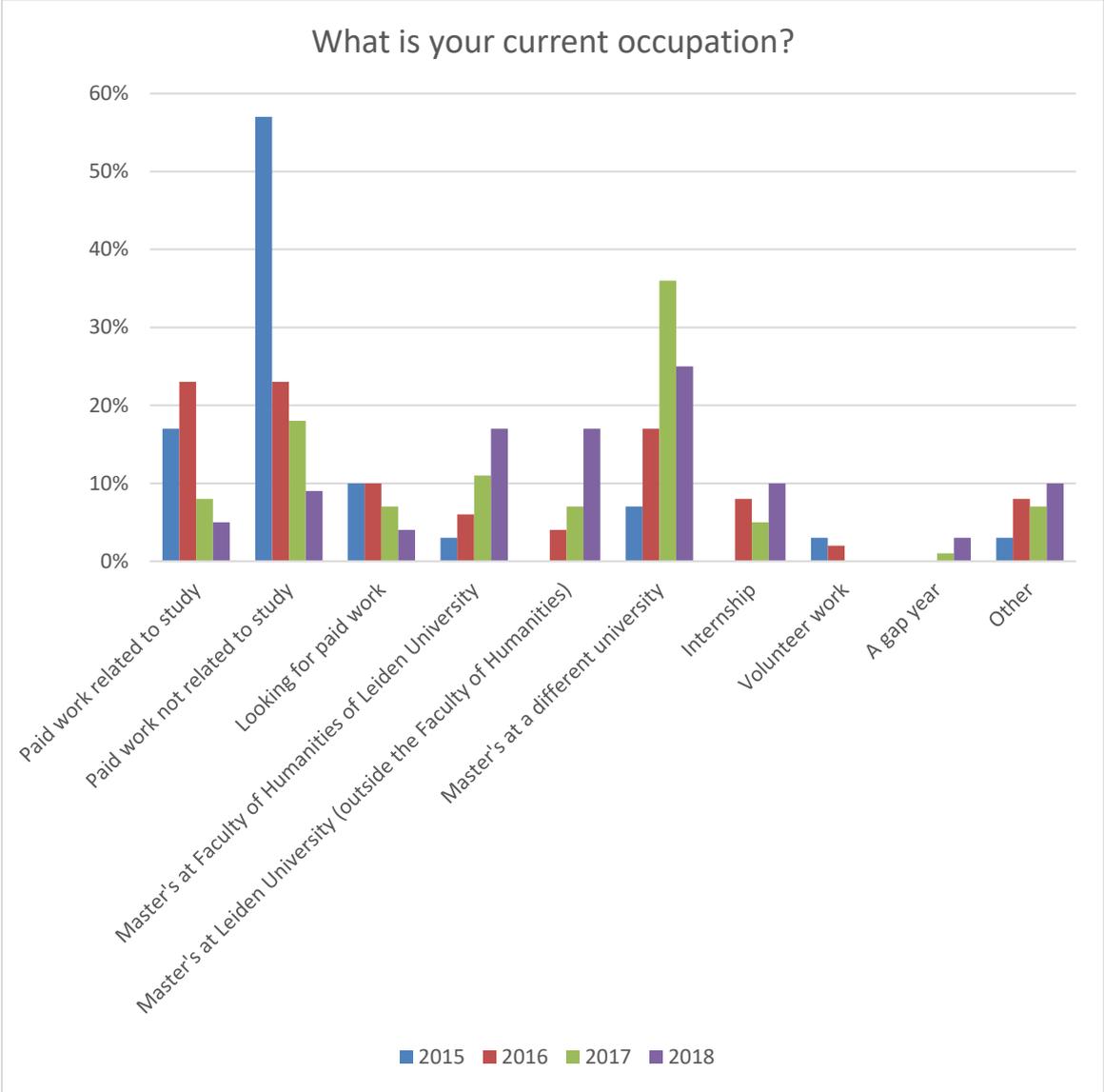


Figure 5. Current occupation per cohort

These data show that the chance finding a job related to the study increases with time (graduates of earlier cohorts more often engage in paid work), as does the chance of finding a job not related the study. These data should be quite reassuring to our current students. For a possible follow-up survey, it would be interesting to see what kind of jobs are considered to be related/unrelated to the study. Given the broadness of the programme, it may often be hard to distinguish between the two categories.

### **Important information 1: Our alumni do well in the labour market<sup>5</sup>**

*In general our alumni seem to land quite nicely in the labour market. This is also indicated by the many interesting stories gathered for our campaign “Alumni Dreams”, which are collected and shared on LinkedIn by Sarita Koendjiharie, and can also be found on the website [This is International Studies](#).*

### **3.4 Which skills and courses are deemed important?**

As we already indicated above, the internship plays an important role in terms of labour market preparation. However, not only the internship is seen as important, rather the entire discretionary space which allows students to give their own flavour to the programme (internship, exchange or minor) is deemed to be the most important element of the study programme when it comes to relevance to current (or desired) occupation. When asked to rank order the various components of the programme, alumni, recent graduates and students all indicated that this is the most important component in that regard:

<b>Alumni</b>	<b>Recent graduates</b>	<b>Current students</b>
Discretionary space	Discretionary space	Discretionary space
Discipline courses	Area courses	Area courses
Area courses	Discipline courses	Language courses
Language courses	PRINS	Discipline courses
PRINS	Language courses	PRINS
Thematic seminars	Thesis (and thesis seminar)	Thesis (and thesis seminar)
Thesis (and thesis seminar)	Thematic seminars	Thematic seminars
Extracurricular activities	Extracurricular activities	Extracurricular activities

*Table 1. Components of the programme ranked by relevance for occupation<sup>6</sup>*

### **Important information 2: The discretionary space is crucial**

*The first semester of the third year is an important phase in the programme with regards to the relevance of what you learn for your future career. This means that it is important to choose wisely and with an eye to the future.*

In the sounding board session the alumni added that area knowledge and language knowledge are important when *entering* the labour market: it makes you stand out in the crowd, especially when you have done an area or language that is felt to be more exotic, or unique. The mere fact that you know Hindi makes you an interesting candidate, even when the language is not a prerequisite for the job.

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<sup>5</sup> The header “Important information” is inserted at certain points throughout the report to take stock of the possible takeaways of the analysis. They are often formulated as information for students, but should also be read as encouragement and advice to the programme to promote and disseminate this information.

<sup>6</sup> In conversations with alumni, the importance of extracurricular activities is often emphasized. The low position in the rank order may be due to the fact that we asked for “component[s] of the study programme”, to which extracurricular activities do not belong.

**Important information 3: Specific knowledge makes you stand out**

*The specific area and language knowledge can help you get a job or an internship more easily. This is something to take into account when choosing your area and language in the first year. However, this concerns mainly the entrance to the labour market; alumni indicate that knowledge of area (and disciplines) is actually not that important for their current occupation (see Figure 8).*

Alumni also indicate that the consultancy project PRINS can be very useful in finding an internship, or landing their first job. Having done a consultancy project for a well-known international organisation looks good on your resume. Also, the collaboration skills trained in PRINS are key skills needed in the labour market. However, alumni admit that they acknowledge this only in hindsight. When they followed the course, they could not really see its added value, even though the programme emphasized the importance of the course for labour market preparation.

**Important information 4: In hindsight the programme makes a lot of sense**

*Try to see the value of the courses you take in the light of the goals you are pursuing rather than seeing them as an obstacle you have to deal with to get to your graduation. Alumni regularly say in hindsight that they see the value of a course, or the rationale behind the structure of the programme. However, it would be much more inspiring to be motivated by the added value of courses while actually taking them.*

**3.4.1 Difference between skills needed for labour market and master's programmes**

When it comes to labour market preparation, bachelor's programmes have a difficult position, as they must both prepare students for entering the labour market as well as for continuing their post-graduate studies, e.g. a master's programme. Alumni indicate that the skills needed for those options differ:

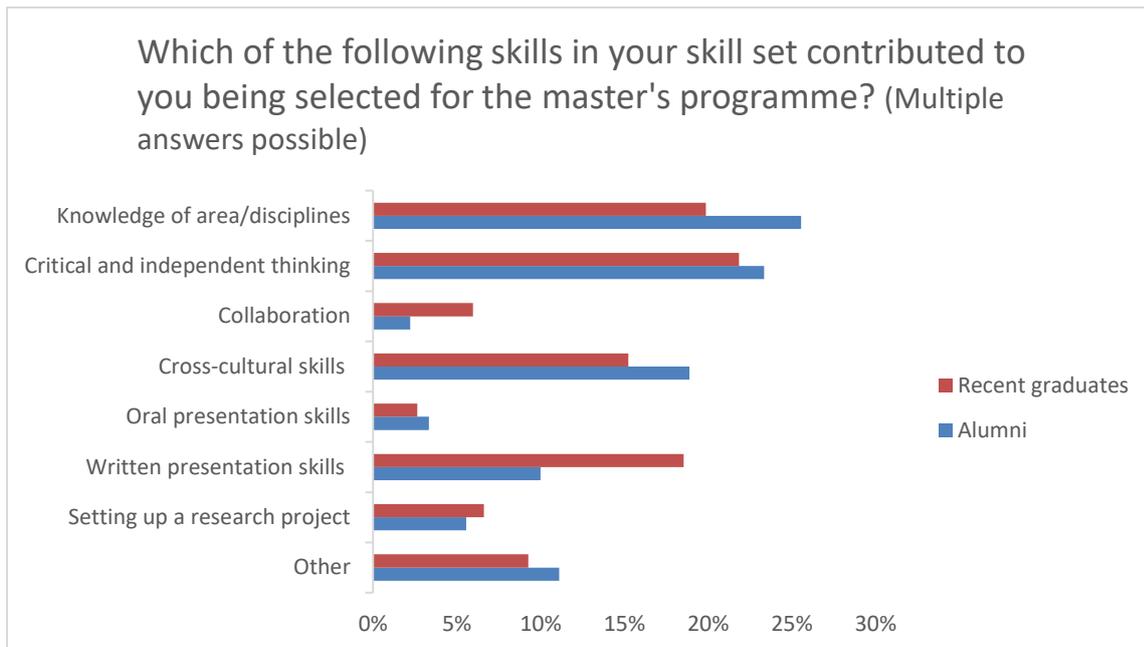


Figure 6. Skills needed for selection master's programme<sup>7</sup>

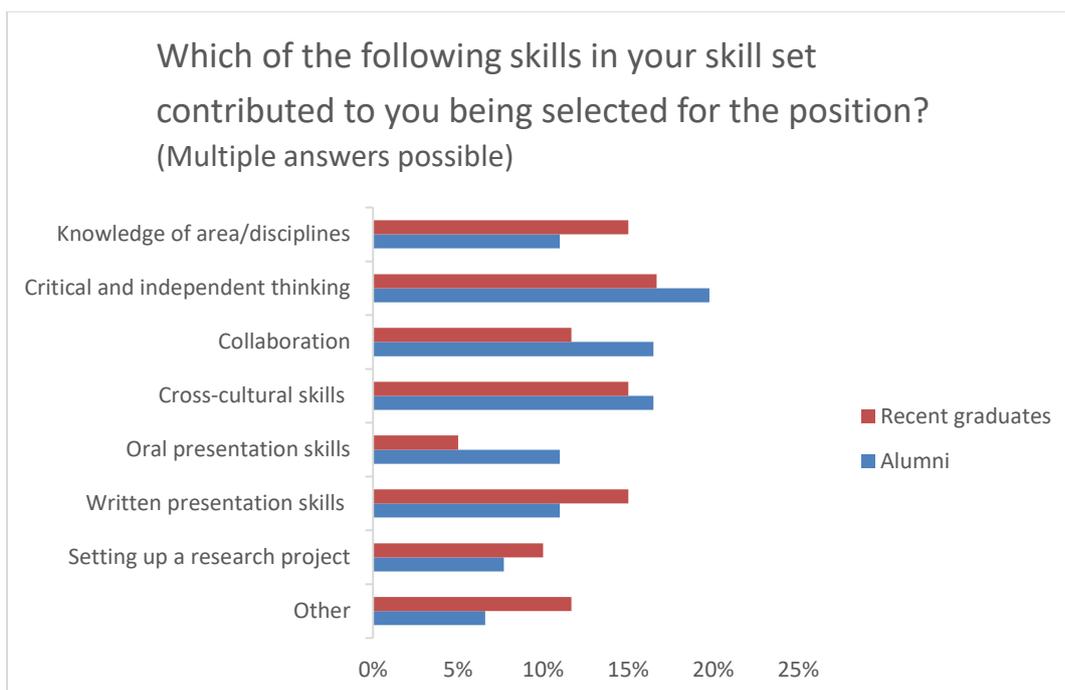


Figure 7. Skills need for selection labour market

The figures show that the perception of skills needed for a master's programme differ considerably from those needed on the labour market. For a master's programme it is most important to come prepared with the necessary knowledge and be able to think critically, and secondly to have written presentations skills next to being culturally sensitive. For the labour market the skillset needed is less skewed. Knowledge appears less important, while critical

<sup>7</sup> Multiple answers were possible and interestingly enough the alumni checked relatively more answer boxes in the labour market selection question (see figure 7), while the recent graduates checked relatively more answer boxes in the master's programmes selection.

thinking remains an important skill, but now closely followed by collaboration skills and cross cultural skills.

**Important information 5: You should set a goal to make smart choices**

*To know which choices within the programme are smart, you have to know what your goal is. If you plan to look for a job after your bachelor's you will probably make different choices than when you are planning to do a master's.*

**3.4.2 Level of skills needed for occupation**

Again, alumni differ somewhat from recent graduates in their assessment of the contribution of skills to their selection. When asked what the required level of knowledge and skills is for the desired/current occupation, some of the differences persist, but the general picture is similar, even though recent graduates generally give more importance to skills learnt at the programme:

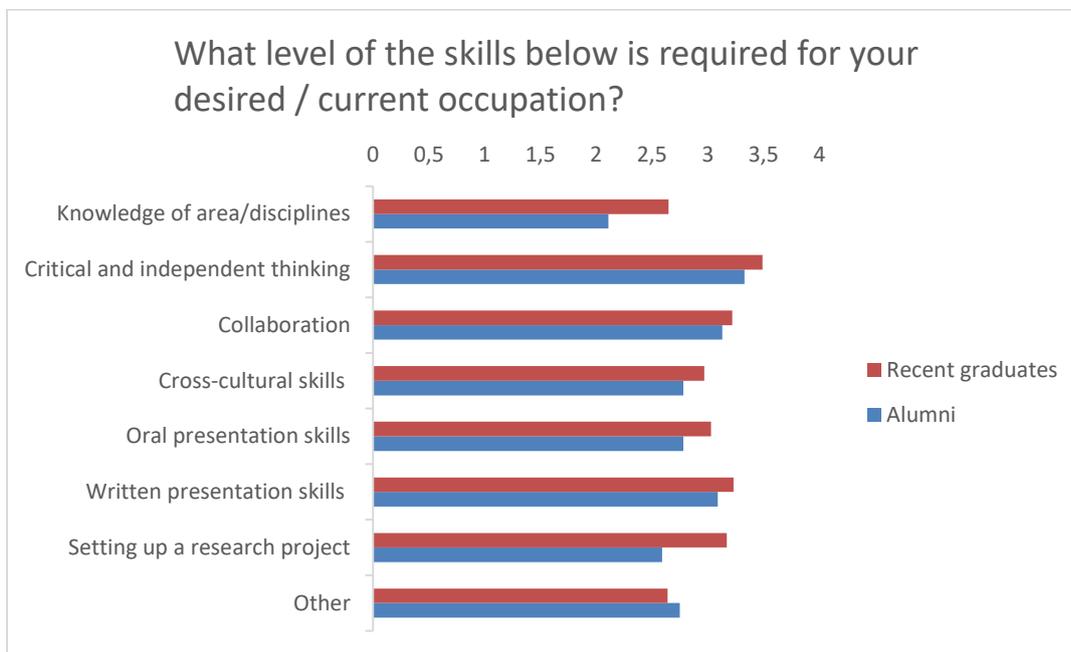


Figure 8. Required level of skills for desired/current occupation<sup>8</sup>

The acquired knowledge is the least important, while critical thinking is seen as by far the most important skill. Especially the low importance of knowledge may feel counterintuitive to current students.

The basic trend appears to be: once in the labour market, alumni learn from their experiences, that is to say, they value experiential knowledge more than the specific academic skills and knowledge. Looking at the complete skill set which students acquired, other components like collaboration and cross cultural skills, which are not considered academic skills, appear equally important.

Emphasis on knowledge and skills like setting up a research project was deemed as not necessarily conducive to a good labour market preparation for alumni. In contrast, when we

<sup>8</sup> Answers on a scale from 1 – 5, with 1 being “very low” and 5 “very high.”

asked current student which skills they would like the programme to give more attention to, academic knowledge was ranked as first:

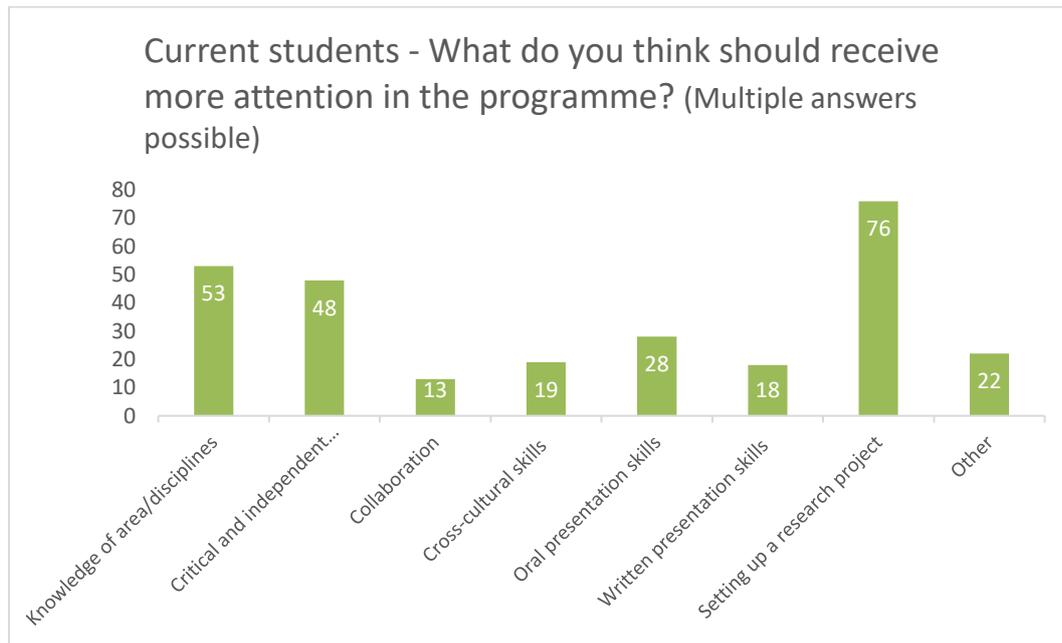


Figure 9. Which skills should receive more attention according to current students?

### **Important information 6: The labour market requires certain non-academic skills**

*While the knowledge and skills typically associated with academia may be an important reason or inspiration for following an academic education, other, less typically academic skills, will often turn out to be at least as helpful at the labour market.*

There is a discrepancy between what current students think needs more emphasis and what is actually useful with regards to labour market preparation. This may be one of the reasons students are under the impression that labour market preparation is not sufficient within the International Studies programme.

A number of skills are recurrently mentioned in the category “Other”. Among the options mentioned by students and alumni alike under this category, were the possibility of doing a course on quantitative research methods, as well as more attention to language.

## 3.5 Analysis of answers to open questions

We asked what alumni and students see as strengths and challenges of the programme in relation to the labour market and what we would need to change to make students feel more prepared for the labour market. Below is an analysis of the answers, starting with the answers given by the alumni and subsequently comparing the answers of recent graduates and current students to those.

### 3.5.1 Strengths

#### 3.5.1.1 Strengths according to alumni

The alumni frequently mention the fact that they have learned to work *inter- or multidisciplinary* (52)<sup>9</sup> as the main strength of the programme. A closely related answer is the *broadness of the*

<sup>9</sup> The number indicates the number of times this item was mentioned in the open answers.

*programme/the knowledge of a large variety of topics* (49). Students learn to navigate different disciplines and integrate regional perspectives. As one of the alumni in the sounding board session put it: “You can throw anything at me and I will be able to figure it out.”

### **Important information 7: Breadth of the programme makes student adaptive**

*Students are sometimes afraid that the broadness of the programme makes it harder for them to enter the labour market where specialists are highly valued. The comments of our alumni, however, indicate that the multidisciplinary background and the broad basis of knowledge our students acquire also can make them stand out.*

Closely following the first two items are *cross cultural working skills* (33), *language skills* (28), *area knowledge* (29) and *critical/analytical thinking* (30). The alumni sounding board group emphasized how much of an advantage they have in these areas compared to the people they work with. One of the students in the sounding board had a similar experience when following a minor at TU Delft University. He mentioned how hard it is for students to look beyond their International Studies bubble: “We all have the same skill set and do not see how special those skills are.” However, meeting students from another university made it clear that you actually learn useful things at International Studies. Another way of breaking free from the bubble during the programme is doing an internship. Therefore, the programme has the ambition to increase the number of students doing an internship.

Alumni in the sounding board group additionally mentioned the relative ease with which International Studies students can process (and analyse) large amounts of information, the high level of English in both written and oral presentations and being very adaptive as strengths. These elements were also mentioned in the survey.

### **Important information 8: International Studies students should break free from their bubble**

*Many of the skills learned at International Studies do not seem that special until you actually meet people from different academic backgrounds. International Studies deliver top notch cross cultural working skills, language skills, area knowledge and critical/analytical thinking. The programme should make students aware of that, help them reflect on their skills and formulate a profile.*

Other strengths that alumni mention relatively frequently are the *ability to put issues in a global perspective* (17), the *international, open minded and vibrant study environment* (16), *international experience* (13) and *practical experience from the course Practising International Studies and the Internship* (12).<sup>10</sup>

#### **3.5.1.2 Strengths according to recent graduates**

The recent graduates are generally in agreement with the alumni on the strengths of the programme. They most frequently mention *inter/multidisciplinarity* (22), *language skills* (20), *broadness of the programme* (18), *critical thinking* (17) and *area knowledge* (16). *Cross cultural working skills* (12) and *global perspective* (12) are also frequently mentioned.

#### **3.5.1.3 Strengths according to current students**

Students mention similar items as alumni and recent graduates. Students most frequently mention the *broadness of the programme* (64) as its main strength. Second is the *inter/multidisciplinary approach* (54) and third *language skills* (47). A second group of less frequently mentioned items is formed by: *area knowledge* (25), *critical thinking* (22), *study*

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<sup>10</sup> I left out items that were mentioned less than 10 times by the alumni.

*environment* (18), *cross cultural working skills* (16), *presentation skills* (12) and *being adaptive/flexible* (12).

Interestingly enough, students and recent graduates place more of an emphasis on language as a strength compared to the alumni, while alumni value cross cultural working skills higher. It is hard to pinpoint the reason for this difference, but it may well be that alumni with some work experience are more appreciative of 'soft skills' which have proven their use in the work place, while recent graduates and current students focus more on the knowledge and skills connected to the content of the programme, which is often less directly relevant to a specific occupation.

### 3.5.2 Challenges

#### 3.5.2.1 Main challenges according to alumni

While the *broadness of the programme* is often mentioned as one of its main strengths, alumni also indicate frequently (92) that it is a challenge to deal with it in the labour market or when trying to enter a master's programme. Often employers do not know the programme, so it is important to be able to explain what you bring to the organisation. This is also connected to another challenge mentioned frequently, namely the *difficulty of explaining your profile* (30).

#### **Important information 9: Be aware of your own profile**

*Make sure you know what makes you stand out in the labour market, or when applying for a master's programme. International Studies often does not ring a bell and apart from having specialist knowledge of an area and a language, you cannot boast of being a specialist in any discipline.*

That being said, our graduates often find their way into prestigious master's programmes, so the value of an International Studies diploma is appreciated by other universities.

The second main challenge mentioned by alumni is the absence of *training in statistics* (45). The absence of training in statistics has, of course, to do with the fact that International Studies is not a social sciences programme. However, to be eligible for social science master's programmes as well as certain positions in the labour market, statistics is needed. Interestingly, now that we offer statistics as a pilot (second semester 2018/19), only 22 students actually expressed their interest, out of the about 1200 students who received an invitation to apply (second year and higher).

Finally, many alumni mention the absence of practical skills; the programme is *too academic and theoretical* and not focused on, for example, business skills (30).

#### **Important information 10: Do useful extracurricular activities**

*There are always elements that will be missing from your study programme. This is often for the very practical reason that there are only 180 credits in a bachelor's programme and courses that fit the profile are preferred compared to courses that are less compatible. Moreover, the programme is academic and not a professional education, which explains the emphasis on theory. It is important to identify what elements you may want to add yourself in time, and pursue those if necessary outside the curriculum. In addition to that, the programme needs to be clear about what it offers and what students should look for elsewhere*

In the sounding board sessions we had similar discussions about missing courses, but also advice for new workshops (e.g. how to write a resume) and events (e.g. a career event).

However, often such workshops and events are already organized, but students do not know they exist.

### **Important information 11: Inform yourself of all university facilities**

*There is often much more available than students think. Our Career Service offers much of the training and coaching needed for professional education that is not part of the curriculum.*

#### *3.5.2.2 Main challenges according to recent graduates*

Recent graduates also mention the *absence of specialisation* (47) and *quantitative research* (21) as challenge. They are less concerned about the *unclear profile* (5) for future employers and the *focus on theory* (7). This may have to do with the particular situation they are in: they often are either doing a master's programme, or applying to one, so skills related to being selected for a job, or skills which turn out to be useful at the job are not on the radar yet. It may also be that they still remember the consultancy project *Practising International Studies* (last semester of the programme) which addresses exactly those elements. Just as the alumni, recent graduates mention courses they would have liked to be a part of the programme like economics, law or negotiating.

#### *3.5.2.3 Main challenges according to current students*

Current students also mention the *broadness of the programme* (95) as the main challenge. Other, less pressing challenges are similar to the ones already mentioned: *unclear profile* (31), *lack of practical skills* (28) and *absence of quantitative methods* (23). Current students often mention the lack of practical skills and the unclear profile, while they are not yet looking for a job. The fact that recent graduates do not mention these so often can most probably be attributed to the consultancy course which is still fresh in the memory of recent graduates, in which exactly these skills are practiced. Current students who filled out the survey had not yet done this capstone project.

### **3.5.3 Possible additions to the programme**

#### *3.5.3.1 Suggestions by alumni*

There are a lot of different comments on improvements to the programme in order to make students more prepared for the labour market. Some items are recurring, like more attention to statistics or more focus on practical skills. Then there are some suggestions for workshops and career fairs that are actually already offered by Career Services.

### **Important information 12: Integrate labour market information**

*Since students do not differentiate between the links from the programme to the labour market (like transferable skills, or specific knowledge) and other useful links to the labour market which are not directly connected to the programme (like writing a resume, career events, or networking with alumni), it would be useful to make all information about labour market accessible from one single webpage.*

Many alumni also stress the necessity for options to meet the labour market. Some suggest a mandatory internship, others ask for more visits to organisations or guest speakers. Since such events are frequently organized by the study association BASIS, it makes sense that the programme keeps in touch with BASIS about these activities and, if possible, supports the activities. Therefore, there is a representative of BASIS in the International Studies Community Building committee.

**Important information 13: The study association plays an important role**

*Both for students and for the programme it is important to acknowledge the role of the study association. Students who would like to become part of the International Studies community, both during and after their studies, should join the study association. The programme should be aware of the activities of the study association and support them.*

**3.5.3.2 Suggestions by recent graduates**

Recent graduates add an interesting point: provide more guidance through the programme. Given the fact that much of what students need for their labour market preparation is already available, it often comes down to students being able to make the right choices. The programme is responsible for the guidance.

**Important information 14: The programme should provide guidance in making choices**

*Students need to be informed of all possibilities the programme offers, but also of the challenges they will face when entering the labour market. This will aid them in making the right choices during their studies. For individual guidance this is a task for the coordinators of studies. The programme should make more general information available.*

**3.5.2.3 Suggestions by students**

Students have many suggestions for possible additions to the programme like more courses on economics, statistics, law, security, religion, geography, communication, environment and sustainability. Some other suggestions are similar to what alumni propose. One of the students eloquently explained the urgency of preparing for the labour market as graduation approaches:

“Talking about the labour market. Courses targeting integrating into the labour market. Anything really would help. I have not given importance to the preparation for the labour market because I never knew what it is like and was never taught it needs some preparation. Now that graduation is getting closer, I realize many things I should have done to increase my employability that I have ignored due to my lack of knowledge on the subject.”

**Important information 15: Students should be aware of the future value of skills they acquire**

*Students learn skills without being aware of why they would need these skills. So they often do try their best to acquire those skills. When they finally understand the use of those skills, they are disappointed that they were never told about it (even though they were). There is no easy solution to this. One thing the programme can do is regularly talk about our graduates' role in society and why the skills the programme offers are useful. This is a collective effort between lecturers, coordinators of studies, Career Services, communication and Programme Board.*

## 4. Sounding board sessions

### 4.1 Introduction

In the surveys, we asked alumni and students to indicate whether they would like to continue the discussion on the labour market in sounding board groups. Many respondents were more than willing to contribute to the discussion! We organized a single session with alumni (this included recent graduates) and asked students to become part of a sounding board that would meet a couple of times to not only discuss their ideas about labour market preparation, but also the vision document, and the implementation of measures proposed to improve labour market preparation in International Studies. In the paragraphs below, there is a description of the first meeting with both groups. The structure of both meetings was similar: introduction, general discussion of what labour market preparation entails and a structured discussion on a number elements of labour market preparation: knowledge, orientation, reflection, practical experience, career skills and academic & transferable skills.

The present report has been drawn up in collaboration with the students sounding board group.

### 4.2 Meeting with alumni

Two of the eight alumni in this group have paid jobs (process manager at a bank and teaching assistant), the others are participating in various master's programmes. Almost all regional specializations are represented. During the general discussion of labour market preparation it proved hard to not discuss practical issues related to the programme and answer the question "What does labour market preparation entail for you?". Some of the issues discussed during the general discussion are:

International students encounter obstacles in the Dutch labour market, which have mainly to do with the Dutch language. Moreover, there is no information about the labour market beyond the Netherlands.

#### **Important information 16: International students need differentiated treatment**

*An international programme such as International Studies should be aware of the fact that the Dutch labour market is more difficult to enter for non-Dutch speaking people and emphasize the importance of learning Dutch. Moreover, many of the students in the programme will probably not stay in the Netherlands. How does that affect labour market preparation?*

The alumni also indicated that more information for pivoting would be appreciated: which choices does one make throughout the programme, or even after the programme to prepare for a master's programme. This fits in with the comments mentioned in 3.5.3.2 *Suggestions by recent graduates* (cf. important information 14).

Other issues mentioned were: how to sell yourself, organizing field trips and whether or not labour market preparation should be a separate (compulsory) course.

The structured discussion of the 4 elements of labour market preparation had a clear theme: there is so much in the programme that is useful for labour market preparation, but students have a hard time understanding and deciding what they need for their personal development.

With regards to **knowledge**, the language and area knowledge are mentioned as important to differentiate yourself on the labour market. The absence of statistics is mentioned as a weaker point.

**Orientation** is closely connected to the discretionary space, which allows students to do an internship and “have a go at it”, as one of the alumni phrased it. Even if it is not your cup of tea, at least you will know that.

**Reflection:** it would be good to include reflection in the curriculum. This could be done by reflecting on your own assignments. Students should also be taught to reflect on their particular set of knowledge and skills: what makes our students special? (see important information 8)

**Practical experience** is closely connected to the course Practising International Studies, Organizational Theory, Culture and Behaviour and the internship track. The alumni admit that they can only truly see that in hindsight. (Cf. important information 4 and 15). Other practical experience that our alumni mention are intercultural communication skills and English skills.

**Career skills:** Practising International Studies can help students get an internship after their studies and the skills learnt during the course should be mentioned on your resume. This does not only concern content, but also leadership skills, HR skill, working in a team.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, students should be made aware of the importance of extracurricular experience (committees, volunteer work etc.) BASIS may play a role in this regard. (cf. important information 10 and 13).

**Transferable skills:** contact with alumni, like “a day in a life of” could be interesting for students.<sup>12</sup>

In general, the alumni are satisfied with the programme in hindsight, even though they identified quite a number of elements that could be improved, or are still missing. Their experience on the labour market, be it as an intern or in a paid job, shows that International Studies does actually prepare students for the labour market and that both knowledge and skills acquired during the programme are useful in future positions. They find that they stand out when compared to their peers when it comes to things like processing large quantities of information, analytical thinking, oral skills, cultural sensitivity, regional knowledge (and how to approach a new region), presentation and communication skills, being adaptive etc. The challenge is to make current students aware of this as well.

### 4.3 Meeting with students

There were seven students present, with regional specialization in Russia & Eurasia, North America, South and Southeast Asia, Middle East and Africa.

Just like with the alumni, the general discussion quickly turned into a discussion of practical issues within the programme. And just like alumni one of the questions students have is how they can branch out from the humanities; what is needed in order to do a social sciences master’s programme? (cf. important information 14).

Students also mention the insecurity they feel with regards to their profile and would appreciate it if the programme would make more explicit that the skill they are acquiring are useful on the labour market. Students need a boost of confidence. (cf. important information 1, 3, 8, 9, 15)

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<sup>11</sup> This was discussed in the context of career skills, although it fits better with practical experience and transferable skills.

<sup>12</sup> This was discussed in the context of transferable skills, but has more to do with orientation and career skills.

Interestingly, students also mention the bubble they are in, which makes it harder to see what would make an International Studies student attractive on the labour market (cf. important information 8)

Furthermore, many students are simply not aware of all the events and workshops that are available at the university. (cf. important information 12).

The Internship group on Facebook is discussed positively. It is a very active group, students share information and the lecturer is always quick to respond to questions. Students often find internships through the Facebook group.

### **Important information 17: The programme should make use of various ways of communication**

*The programme is already aware of the fact that students in principle do not visit the website. Information on the website can still be useful, but it should be shared through various media. Social media have great coverage, so sharing something on Facebook or LinkedIn can be very useful.*

In the structured discussion, the same elements were discussed as in the alumni meeting:

Students are very positive about the **knowledge** they acquire during the programme. They truly feel that they are developing themselves. There is much attention to current issues, which shows the relevance of the programme. Lecturers are well-prepared, knowledgeable, approachable and ready to give advice. There is some criticism on the titles of courses which do not cover the content fully, an issue that has already been addressed by the Programme Board.

With regards to labour market **orientation** there is still a lot unclear. Career events are nice, electives give you a chance to pursue a specific specialization. The alumni dreams are also interesting and can give students direction; alumni can act as a role model.

### **Important information 18: Alumni can function as role models for the students**

*Given the importance of setting a goal and tuning your choices in the programme to that goal, being in touch with alumni is of great help to students. The programme should facilitate interaction between alumni and current students.*

Students indicate that they see guidance in **reflection** as a task of Career Service, for example by providing test to reflect on your personality or professional orientation.

The programme is quite resourceful when it comes to **practical experience**. The usual suspect, Practising International Studies, is mentioned, but also the role of the tutorials in developing useful skills such as presentation skills, or doing a literature review.

### **Important information 19: The tutorial system is invaluable for skills training**

*Since an important part of labour market preparation has to do with developing so-called transferable skills, the tutorial system in International Studies, is an invaluable asset with regards to labour market preparation. Tutors should be aware of this and share this information with students.*

Other ways of gaining practical experience that are mentioned are BASIS committees, internships, Centre for Innovation, creating your own start-up (The Hague is a great city for that).

With regards to **career skills** the students do not discuss the fact that students, especially earlier on in their studies, do not make use of all the events that are organized. (cf. important information 4 and 11)

**Transferable skills:** at International Studies you learn to think critically and out of the box. You meet people from different backgrounds. Those things are important for your development. However, there is a strong focus on writing skills and other academic skills, but not so much attention is given to practical skills such as debating, or soft skills such as leadership or self-development (cf. important information 10)

Finally, students think the culture of “hating the labour market” should be addressed. Many students feel uncomfortable with for-profit companies, even though they could very well end up working for one. This feeling of unease may be due to the way the curriculum is delivered. One student remarks that: “Although the program’s critical tone against neoliberalism, capitalism (and subsequently profit-oriented companies) is a distinctive mark of the programme, it often is done to the extent that many students become ideologically inclined to think of these as evil in nature.”

**Important information 20: The programme should not promote aversion against the labour market**

*The possible harmful effects of the culture of the negative attitude towards the labour market is something lecturers should be aware of; the programme should be balanced in its criticism of political and economic systems.<sup>13</sup>*

**Important information 21: Labour market anxiety could be a problem**

*The negative attitude towards the labour market and labour market preparation could be partly due to anxiety for the unknown future. This may especially be true for broad programmes like International Studies which do not educate students for a certain profession or even a certain field of professions.*

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<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, the programme takes into account the various preferences for types of organizations in the student body when selecting organizations (and guest lectures) for Practising International Studies.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the goal of this project is to ensure that International Studies has a suitable system of labour market preparation, that involves and activates students. To reach that goal the following issues need to be addressed:

1. In which way does the International Studies programme at the present prepare students for their future career?
2. What can we improve with regards to labour market preparation?
3. How can that be implemented in this rather complex programme?
4. How can we make students active participants of the labour market preparation, so that they experience what the programme can offer them in that regard.

The analysis of the surveys and the information gathered at the meetings with students and alumni have provided answers to the first two questions. The latter two will be treated in *Chapter 6. Recommendations*.

### 5.2 Labour market preparation in International Studies

International Studies students are well prepared for the labour market, as our alumni also indicate. They stand out with their specific area and language knowledge and their skill set, including things like cultural sensitivity, being adaptive and collaboration skills. The [alumni dreams](#) can serve as an example of what students are capable of after they graduate. It should be noted that many of our students continue to do a master's programme and it is important that the programme does not lose sight of that element of preparing for the future: the programme does not prepare students exclusively for the labour market.

Important labour market preparation elements in the curriculum are the tutorial system where students train their skills, the discretionary space in the first semester of the third year, where students can choose to do an internship (including the course Organizational Theory, Culture and Behaviour), go on exchange or do a minor, and also the content and language courses. Furthermore, the unique consultancy project Practising International Studies in the final semester is a crucial element where students do not directly get in touch with an organization, but also gain important practical experience.

In addition to curricular labour market preparation, there is much else students can do to prepare themselves for the future. Students can, for example, join the study association BASIS which organizes many labour market preparation events. Additionally, being member of a BASIS committee is very useful preparation as well. Furthermore, the Humanities Career Service, which has a dedicated advisor working for International Studies, organizes many events and workshops specifically aimed at labour market preparation.

In sum, the idea that labour market preparation receives much attention in International Studies, is corroborated by the data from the surveys, as well as in the meetings with students and alumni. The low scores for labour market preparation in the NSE can, therefore, not be attributed to a lack of attention to labour market preparation.

### 5.3 What can be improved?

Both students and alumni mentioned a number of challenges and suggested ways in which the programme could improve the labour market preparation.

Generally speaking many suggestions come down to making current students aware (and proud) of their knowledge and skills, and the relevance of a broad humanities bachelor's programme for the labour market. Furthermore, students would like more guidance throughout the programme, especially when they have to make important choices. A good example is the first choice they make: area and language. This is a choice students make in their first semester, when no one thinks of the labour market, but it is a choice that is still relevant to labour market preparation. Often students or alumni recognize the logic behind the programme in hindsight, but it would be better if they were aware of it when they actually make these important decisions.

There is also another side to the story: even though students indicate they would like to see more guidance, students in the sounding board group also indicated that students should learn to take responsibility for their own choices.

In addition to the challenges, there are also elements which students and alumni feel are missing in the programme. This is in part because they are not aware of all the events Career Service organizes, but there are also many courses which students would like to see as part of the curriculum. Quantitative research methods, or statistics, is on top of the list.

The idea of missing elements also has to do with a lack of clarity about which courses should logically be a part of the programme and which are less of a natural match. In other words, the (humanities) profile of the programme is not clear to students, or they are not aware of the implications of it. This makes it hard for students and alumni to understand curriculum choices based on the profile.

Finally, students and alumni do not make a distinction between programme related labour market preparation and more general labour market preparation, while the programme and the faculty (Career Service) sees them as separate and complementary. This results in miscommunication between the programme and the students.

## 6. Recommendations

### 6.1 Short term recommendations

There is a number of recommendations that can and should be implemented on short notice. This concerns issues which the programme is already working on, or which are a precondition for a smooth working system of labour market orientation.

#### 6.1.1 Present all relevant information on one webpage

There is much information available about the way in which International Studies students can plan their future, but the information is scattered over various websites, or even not available online at all. On the *This is International Studies Website* a new tab *Mapping your future* should be created. Under this tab the programme will gather all relevant labour market preparation information, often in the form of links to other website (e.g. the Career Zone website). The term “Mapping you future” allows for a broad range of information, relevant not only to labour market, but also to other choices students make during their studies and information about post-graduate studies. Moreover, avoiding the term “labour market preparation” may make the website more inviting to students who suffer from labour market anxiety.

Information that should be included or referred to includes: a clear description of the profile of the programme and the graduates, the Alumni dreams series, information about master’s programmes, a guide on choices in the programme, information on courses specifically designed for labour market preparation, information on the “hidden curriculum”, i.e. the transferable skills students acquire throughout the programme and links to the Career Service website.

The guide on choices in the programme should include information on all the areas and languages too, so that students can make an informed choice already in their first year.

Finally, the website should contain a link to the present report, as well as a list of the “important information” items collected in this report (see also the appendix).

#### 6.1.2 Ensure more guidance throughout the programme

Until the academic year 2017/18, the only moment a student was expected to meet with a coordinator of studies, was during their first year, just after the first midterm exams. From the academic year 2018/19 onwards, the coordinators of studies also organize meetings with groups of second year students, discussing their plans for the third year and after. The group conversations create an awareness of the importance of upcoming choices and facilitate the exchange of information between students.

To structure guidance of students through the programme, there is now also a blackboard module *Study Advice BA International Studies*, in which information about choices in the programme will be made available. Career services workshops (e.g. writing a resume, or networking) should be included as well. In the future this medium could possibly be used for the creation of a labour market portfolio by students (see [6.2.4 Building a portfolio](#)).

The student mentors, which guide our students from the introduction days through their first year, could play an important role in making first year students aware of how choices in the programme influence their future. They could point them to *Mapping your Future* to familiarize them with all the options the curriculum and Career Service offer. This will also help students return to the website later on in their studies when they start thinking of the possibilities after graduating and preparing themselves for the labour market.

### 6.1.3 Encourage international students to learn Dutch

The Programme Board of International Studies has long been asking for Dutch courses for its international students. As a result, the Academic Language Centre now offers courses in the Dutch language in The Hague at a reduced rate for students from Leiden University. However, until now, not many students have applied for those courses. The programme should actively promote the courses and connect them to labour market preparation. Ideally, the programme would find a way to find out why students did not apply.

## 6.2 Long term recommendations

The following recommendations are recommendations that require some more research, or the inclusion of other stakeholders. It is important to include students in these initiatives whenever possible, as their success depends on their interest and motivation.

### 6.2.1 Use the student body for promotion of labour market

The student body itself is an enormous source of information with regards to labour market preparation. In a sense, the meetings with groups of second year students make use of this principle already: often all the information about labour market preparation is present within the student body. It would be good to investigate the possibility of creating a “Labour Market Lab”, similar to the “Writing Lab”, where students can help their peers who would like some extra guidance or information.

### 6.2.2 Include labour market relevance in courses

Part of feeling prepared for the labour market is framing of this preparation during the courses students get. If lecturers emphasize how the course coheres with the rest of the programme and what knowledge and skills will be taught and why, students tend to get the feeling of being more prepared for the labour market. Within the tutorials this is incorporated already. It is recommended to incorporate this in all aspects of the programme. This should be looked into together with lecturers.

### 6.2.3 Meet students from different programmes/faculties/universities

In order to profile yourself it may be helpful to compare yourself with others. Since International Studies students all have more or less a similar profile, students sometimes feel as if they will not stand out. One of our alumni suggested during a sounding board session that it would be valuable to set up an activity (a course, a challenge, or something else) that brings together students from different backgrounds to work together on a project. Moreover, a student who did an LDE minor indicated that this was an eye opener for him with regards to the specific skills he acquired in International Studies and how it set him apart for students with other backgrounds. We could start with meeting with study programmes that are based in The Hague, like IRO, Urban Studies, Public Administration or Security Studies.

### 6.2.4 Building a portfolio

As mentioned in section [6.1.2](#) Ensure more guidance throughout the programme, the programme wants to explore the options of students building a labour market portfolio. The portfolio should students help to make conscious decisions during their studies, help them clarify their profile and prepare for entering the labour market. It is important that the portfolio is easily accessible for students and that they can ask for feedback from the programme. The blackboard module *Study Advice BA International Studies* could provide the structure for the portfolio.

#### 6.2.5 Identify strategic moments to communicate about labour market preparation

Next to the “Mapping your future” tab on the This is International Studies website, the programme can identify strategic face to face moments to communicate about what is on offer regarding labour market preparation. These moments can be during lectures, or during other events. For example during the course Organizational Theory, Culture and Behavior a small assignment could be to visit the Internship Smiles stories on the website to find inspiration for an internship.

#### 6.2.6 Make the value of the discretionary space more explicit

The discretionary space can basically be used in two ways: to prepare for a specific master’s programme, or career path after graduating from International Studies, or to explore if something interests you as much as you thought it would. Student should be conscious of this. The programme should work on a communication strategy for this, to coordinate the guidance offered by coordinators of studies, the various messages that appear in the news section of the website, messages on social media, etc. etc.

#### 6.2.7 Update the Alumni Dreams with new information

The *Alumni Dreams* are a wealthy source of information for current students as well as an interesting way of profiling themselves for alumni. It would be interesting to have regular updates of the Alumni Dreams, making it possible to follow the career path or alumni follow. This is especially important since International Studies is such a young programme and all alumni are still in the early stage of their careers.

#### 6.2.8 Change the culture of the programme

Many academics do not truly believe labour market preparation should be part of academic education. We should take this criticism seriously and keep in mind that there are many important things students should do during their studies that use up their time and efforts. Introducing extra activities will often be at the expense of other activities. Therefore, labour market preparation should be thought of as an integral part of the studies. *We are already doing* labour market preparation, it is now mainly about being more explicit about the use of what students are learning for their future. Academics know that they use the skills they acquired studying medieval texts, political systems, art, etc. for completely different tasks as well; this is the concept of ‘transferable skills’. If every lecturer would use 10 minutes in their lecture series talking about how he or she uses the knowledge/understanding/skills they acquired during their studies in their daily jobs, that would mean a giant leap forwards in our labour market preparation.

Additionally, many assessment methods do not only assess knowledge, but also skills. It may be useful to explain the rationale behind a certain assessment method in such a way that they see the added value for their future. For example, when we ask students to make short video clips instead of doing a presentation in class, this is an exercise in online presence or digital presenting as well. The assessment method will make perfect sense to students when the lecturer explains how they could employ this skill later in life (e.g. job interview often require making a short video nowadays).

Finally, some students indicate that the culture of the programme is rather negative towards the labour market, both within the student body as with regards to views of lecturers in the programme. We should remember to prepare students in such a way that they can contribute positively to society (which is what most of our lecturers already do), and remind students that they have a responsibility in society after they graduate. There are various ways in which one

can contribute to society, but the labour market is not our enemy, it is the future of many of our students, and it is where most of us make our living.

### 6.3 The future

It feels natural to finish this report about the future of our students with a reference to the future. The recommendations in this chapter, represent just some of the actions which can be taken to improve the labour market preparation of our students. For example, we can still think of other innovative ways to free our students from their 'bubble' (important information 8), or to facilitate interaction between alumni and students (important information 18). In short, the present report contains a wealth of information which can be used to continue to innovate in the coming years.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to keep involving students in this process. One way in which this is already done, is by the "Students as Partners" project, in which students of International Studies will submit a labour market preparation project, using this report as starting point and involving staff as stakeholders. Moreover, there are already students who have applied for a labour market subsidy which our Faculty has started granting. Through this kind of initiatives, and the continuous improvement of our own programme of guidance, we plan to make the labour market preparation for our students even better than it already is.

## Appendix: 'Important information' items

### **Important information 1: Our alumni do well on the labour market**

*In general our alumni seem to land quite nicely on the labour market. This is also indicated by the many interesting stories collected for our campaign "Alumni Dreams", which are collected and shared on LinkedIn by Sarita Koendjibiharie, and can also be found on the website [This is International Studies](#).*

### **Important information 2: The discretionary space is crucial**

*The first semester of the third year is an important phase in the programme with regards to the relevance of what you learn for your future occupation. This means that it is important to choose wisely and with an eye to the future.*

### **Important information 3: Specific knowledge makes you stand out**

*The specific area and language knowledge can help you get a job or an internship more easily. This is something to take into account when choosing your area and language in the first year. However, this concerns mainly the entrance to the labour market; alumni indicate that knowledge of area (and disciplines) is actually not that important for their current occupation (see Figure 8).*

### **Important information 4: In hindsight the programme makes a lot of sense**

*Try to see the value of the courses you take in the light of the goals you are pursuing rather than seeing them as an obstacle you have to deal with to get to your graduation. Alumni regularly say in hindsight that they see the value of a course, or the rationale behind the structure of the programme. However, it would be much more inspiring to be motivated by the added value of courses while actually taking them.*

### **Important information 5: You should set a goal to make smart choices**

*To know which choices within the programme are smart, you have to know what your goal is. If you plan to look for a job after your bachelor's you will probably make different choices than when you are planning to do a master's.*

### **Important information 6: The labour market requires certain non-academic skills**

*While the knowledge and skills typically associated with academia may be an important reason or inspiration for following an academic education, other, less typically academic skills, will often turn out to be at least as helpful at the labour market.*

### **Important information 7: Broadness of the programme makes student adaptive**

*Students are sometimes afraid that the broadness of the programme makes it harder for them to enter the labour market where specialists are highly valued. The comments of our alumni, however, indicate that the multidisciplinary background and the broad basis of knowledge our students acquire also can make them stand out.*

### **Important information 8: International Studies students should break free from their bubble**

*Many of the skills learned at International Studies do not seem that special until you actually meet people from different academic backgrounds. International Studies deliver top notch cross cultural*

*working skills, language skills, area knowledge and critical/analytical thinking. The programme should make students aware of that, help them reflect on their skills and formulate a profile.*

**Important information 9: Be aware of your own profile**

*Make sure you know what makes you stand out in the labour market, or when applying for a master's programme. International Studies often does not ring a bell and apart from having specialist knowledge of an area and a language, you cannot boast of being a specialist in any discipline.*

**Important information 10: Do useful extracurricular activities**

*There are always elements that will be missing from your study programme. This is often for the very practical reason that there are only 180 credits in a bachelor's programme and courses that fit the profile are preferred compared to courses that are less compatible. Moreover, the programme is academic and not a professional education, which explains the emphasis on theory. It is important to identify what elements you may want to add yourself in time, and pursue those if necessary outside the curriculum. In addition to that, the programme needs to be clear about what it offers and what students should look for elsewhere*

**Important information 11: Inform yourself of all university facilities**

*There is often much more available than students think. Our Career Service offers much of the training and coaching needed for professional education that is not part of the curriculum.*

**Important information 12: Integrate labour market information**

*Since students do not differentiate between the links from the programme to the labour market (like transferable skills, or specific knowledge) and other useful links to the labour market which are not directly connected to the programme (like writing a resume, career events, or networking with alumni), it would be useful to make all information about labour market accessible from one single webpage.*

**Important information 13: The study association plays an important role**

*Both for students and for the programme it is important to acknowledge the role of the study association. Students who would like to become part of the International Studies community, both during and after their studies, should join the study association. The programme should be aware of the activities of the study association and support them.*

**Important information 14: The programme should provide guidance in making choices**

*Students need to be informed of all possibilities the programme offers, but also of the challenges they will face when entering the labour market. This will aid them in making the right choices during their studies. For individual guidance this is a task for the coordinators of studies. The programme should make more general information available.*

**Important information 15: Students should be aware of the future value of skills they acquire**

*Students have to learn skills before they actually need them. So they often don't. When they finally need them, they are disappointed that they were never told they need them, even though they were. There is no easy solution to this. One thing the programme can do is regularly talk about "the future" and which skills will be useful. This is a collective effort between lecturers, coordinators of studies, Career Services, communication and Programme Board.*

**Important information 16: International students need differentiated treatment**

*An international programme such as International Studies should be aware of the fact that the Dutch labour market is more difficult to enter for non-Dutch speaking people and emphasize the importance of learning Dutch. Moreover, many of the students in the programme will probably not stay in the Netherlands. How does that affect labour market preparation?*

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