

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

“Our job is to deliver a good secondary school student, not a good university student.” Secondary school teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding university preparation



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

University readiness
 Secondary school teachers
 Teacher beliefs
 Classroom practices
 Interviews

ABSTRACT

This study investigated secondary school teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding university preparation by interviewing 50 teachers. Teachers most often mentioned study skills as important aspect of university readiness. Although most teachers believed their role involved contributing to university readiness, few teachers had university preparation as explicit goal; instead, most of them mentioned university preparation practices they performed unintentionally. These preparation practices mainly focused on providing students with information about studying at university. As barriers to university preparation teachers mentioned spending most of their time to preparing their students for national examinations and a lack of knowledge of what universities expected from first-year students. More awareness of the importance of preparation and collaboration between schools and universities offer potentially helpful resolutions.

1. Introduction

High dropout rates in the first year of university education are a global problem. Moreover, in the Netherlands, most students need at least four years to complete a three-year bachelor programme and one out of four students make a wrong choice of degree programme and consequently switch during or after the first year ([Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017](#)). This is costly for both individual students and the government, which makes improving the success rates in higher education an important point on the political agenda ([Onderwijsraad, 2015](#)). As a consequence, plenty of effort goes out to improving student success in universities and it is a well-researched area. International reviews provide overviews of a plethora of factors – e.g., demographic, cognitive, psychological, and institutional – that are related to achievement and retention in higher education ([Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012](#); [Robbins et al., 2004](#)) and a substantial number of studies have been published in the research area of postsecondary student success, especially on first-year success, since research showed that how well a student performs in the first year is indicative of success in the continuing years ([Hurtado, Han, Sáenz, Espinosa, & Cabrera, 2007](#); [Jansen & Bruinsma, 2005](#)). In contrast, not much attention has been given to the phase before the transition, even though a key reason for dropout and delay is that students are not bridging the gap between secondary and university education effectively ([Lowe & Cook, 2003](#)). To increase the likelihood that students will experience a successful transition, efforts to contribute to students’ university readiness, i.e., university preparation, must be an explicit focus of secondary education, especially in countries with differentiated secondary education systems that direct students early into tracks that guarantee access to certain levels of postsecondary education. We focus on the Netherlands for this study, where students in the highest track of secondary education, literally called preparatory university education (short: pre-university education), need to be

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ready for university when they graduate. Teachers in pre-university education are university-educated themselves and can thus be seen as ‘experience experts’. Moreover, they often know their students well, having taught them for several years, which means they potentially play a crucial role in students’ university preparation. We investigate whether and to what extent they pay attention to making their students ready for university. We also consider teachers’ beliefs about the most important aspects of university readiness and their role perception. These beliefs matter, because they act as guides to thought and behaviour (Borg, 2001). By accounting for teacher beliefs, we seek to understand the bases of their practices, which is necessary information if the goal ultimately is to improve their practices (Nespor, 1987) and thereby enhance students’ university readiness. To our knowledge, little research addresses teachers’ beliefs about their role in preparing students for postsecondary education or their preparation practices in the classroom. This study thus can contribute both to research into university transitions and to practice. In the theoretical framework, we will discuss current knowledge about aspects of university readiness and about teachers’ beliefs and practices.

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

2.1. Aspects of university readiness

The transition from secondary school to university is a difficult one for many students. Lowe and Cook (2003) found that in a sample of first-year students at a university in the United Kingdom one out of four to one out of three students faced considerable difficulties in adjusting to postsecondary education. An important reason for adjustment issues concerns the difference between the heavily regulated secondary school learning environment on the one hand and the university environment that makes a strong appeal to a student’s self-regulation capacities on the other hand, in combination with a significant increase in amount and complexity of study content. Much research into first-year success confirmed that a substantial number of students struggle with time management and self-regulation, especially in the first semester (e.g., Haggis, 2006; Van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010). These adjustment difficulties can cause academic problems, such as underachievement or even dropout, and psychological problems, like depression (Leung, 2017; Lowe & Cook, 2003). What also makes the transition challenging is that many secondary school students do not know what to expect or have unrealistic expectations about university in general (Heublein et al., 2017; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005) or about the specific degree programme they have chosen to pursue (De Buck, 2009), which creates academic and social challenges during the transition, with the accompanying high levels of stress (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007).

A better preparation for university during secondary education could make the transition less challenging. To prepare students, teachers need accurate conceptions of what it means to be ready for university. Little research has investigated teachers’ beliefs about college readiness, though Kirst and Bracco (2004) showed that secondary school teachers held different conceptions of college readiness than what college professors expected. Secondary school teachers tended to think graduating from secondary school implied college readiness, whereas professors expected students to master the content knowledge taught in high school but also to possess sufficient learning skills, such as an ability to deal with large amounts of content. These skills are not an explicit part of the high school curriculum, so they are not automatically being mastered during high school. Biology teachers in a qualitative case study by Friedrichsen (2002) saw the following aspects as part of college readiness: being able to think critically and outside the box; having study skills, laboratory skills and confidence; and being able to take tests and read scientific texts. Although these aspects are important, they do not present a complete picture of what is needed to be ready for university.

In recent decades, college readiness has received substantial attention in research, especially in the United States. The four-part model of college readiness by Conley (2008) provides a useful overview of readiness aspects. It includes four keys a student needs to be successful in college: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. This model can also be applied to university readiness in the Netherlands. The first key consists of key cognitive strategies, or ways of thinking and working that are needed and expected in a college environment, such as analytical thinking, identifying research questions, reasoning, evaluating, precision, and accuracy. In higher education, educational content tends to be more complex than that provided in secondary school; hence, in order to master it, students need good cognitive strategies. Moreover, especially in research universities like those in the Netherlands, course content is highly research-based, requiring students to read academic articles or to design their own research proposals. This task demands thinking skills. The second factor Conley (2008) refers to is key content knowledge, or the mastery of knowledge and skills pertaining to the core subjects and an understanding of the structure of knowledge in these subject areas. For English for example, key skills include writing and presentation skills. As a third factor, a prospective university student must possess key learning skills and techniques. These academic behaviours or beliefs include time management skills, study skills, persistence, motivation, and self-efficacy. The importance of this factor becomes particularly clear when considering the difference between the externally regulated secondary school environment and the freer college environment that expects substantial independence from students and covers more content more quickly. Finally, the fourth factor refers to key transition knowledge and skills, or information that students need to get into college and then navigate its environment. In particular, they need financial knowledge, to understand the costs and financial aid available; cultural knowledge, to recognize the prevalent norms and values in college; and procedural knowledge, to perceive how the admission process works. These transitional skills are especially pertinent to a student’s choice of a degree programme.

We chose to use Conley’s model as an overview of university readiness, because in contrast to theories of student success in higher education such as the ones by Tinto (1993) and Astin (1999), or overviews of important correlates of student success such as those by Richardson et al. (2012) and Robbins et al. (2004), this model focuses explicitly on what is needed before a student makes the transition. Related to this, unlike these other models or overviews, Conley’s model includes transition knowledge and skills, which students need these to make an adequate choice of what degree programme they are going to pursue. This aspect is crucial, because in

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