



Since the BSA was also discussed last year we have made use of the previously written document, made the necessary changes and added information based on the current circumstances and recently published documents.

What is the BSA?

A binding study advice (BSA) is a decision made by the university or university of applied sciences regarding the progress of your study program. Each student will receive study advice at the end of the first academic year. This advice is positive if the student obtains enough credits but the advice is negative when a student does not obtain the determined amount of credits, and this means that the student has to quit their study program.

BSA at Tilburg University

Although the study load of the first year comprises 60 European credits (ECTS) or study points, a student can continue with their study program if they have obtained 42 ECTS in their first year. When a student obtains less than 42 ECTS (70%) at the end of the first year, the student then receives a binding negative study advice. Resulting in the decision that the university does not consider the student suitable for their study program.

Rules regarding the BSA

The university must take a number of things into account in regards to binding study advice.

- A student must receive sufficient counseling from the student counselor.
- A student must receive a warning after the 1st semester, when there is a strong possibility of receiving negative study advice if they do not improve sufficiently.
- The personal circumstances of a student must be considered.
- A student has the right to be heard.

All rules that apply to a BSA can be found in the Teaching and Examination Regulations (EER) of a specific study program.

Origins of the BSA?

In 1990, discussions took place in the House of Representatives if it was possible to make a binding study advice a legal requirement, as part of the outline agreement. The then Minister of Education Jo Ritzen wanted to set up a BSA to ensure that universities would make an effort to allow students to graduate within four years.

The agreement led to an amendment of the Higher Education Act in 1993¹, which enables educational institutions to issue binding study advice. Universities were not obliged to participate and had their own authority to decide which subjects were part of the BSA and how many credits had to be obtained by students.

Is it a legal requirement for a university to apply for a BSA standard?

The Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (WHW) obligates that educational institutions have to issue study advice at the end of the first academic year.² The institution itself can opt for binding advice, but that is not necessary. If a study program applies a binding study advice, they must set a standard.

Well-being of students

Recently RIVM in collaboration with Trimbos Instituut and GGD Ghor Nederland published a shocking report on student wellbeing. Student wellbeing has massively suffered under the Covid-19 crisis. 79% of the students feels lonely, 51% of the students suffers from psychological struggles, 68% of the students struggle with emotional exhaustion and 26% of the students has had suicidal thoughts in the month before the questionnaire was held. "Many students experience stress, pressure to perform and trouble sleeping." ¹

Yesterday the agreements from the new coalition of the Dutch government were presented. Here they stated that lowering the BSA is one of their goals, specifically because they feel it will benefit the wellbeing of students. Though it is great to see that this is one of their goals it will of course take some time before the plan is actually implemented. We feel that we cannot let the students, whose wellbeing is currently at such a low level, be overlooked.

When students do not feel well they are not able to perform well. As a university we should not only care about the education we provide for our students, but also about how that system affects them mentally. Since student wellbeing is so closely linked to their performance it should be our top priority to ensure that we can foster it.

Side effects of the BSA

Universities have indicated in previous years that they are concerned about the study progress of students if the BSA is scrapped. We should however not forget, that the BSA can also be a cause for study delay. If students go to another university to start all over again in a similar program with similar courses they will have a study delay. According to research by the Vrije Universiteit, 43.4% of the students with a negative BSA end up following the same study program at another educational institution and 41.9% of the students with a negative BSA follow a similar study program at another educational institution. Sending If a student cannot continue their program at our university they will thus likely go to another university to study the same program and we will lose the student. The BSA also creates negative effects on the personal development of students. After all, the BSA influences the choice of students to become active in study/student associations, employee participation, or in voluntary organizations. Many students feel great pressure to perform because of the BSA. In a certain way this is good of course because as a university you want your students to do well. When this becomes too much however it can influence their wellbeing negatively. Students can experience a constant pressure to perform and therefore swerve from developing themselves outside of their studies. We believe however that this extracurricular development is essential for the student and that

¹ RIVM, Trimbos Instituut en GGD GHOR Nederland, Dopmeijer, J. M., Nuijen, J., Busch, M. C. M., Tak, N. I., & Verweij, A. (2021, november).

student life should never just be about the study one follows. It is precisely these extracurricular activities that are of great importance in these difficult times. These activities in fact enhance social cohesion and prevent students from becoming lonely. The bigger the network leads to the smaller chance of study delay.^[4] The BSA detracts from students' own personal responsibilities because they cannot choose whether to continue with their studies.

Possible solutions

Just as last year, we would like to propose the following solutions:

- Lowering the BSA to 30 ECTS

Lowering the BSA from 42 ECTS to 30 ECTS will reduce pressure on students. The reduction in the pressure of the BSA will have a positive effect on the mental health of students, which, as has been proved by the RIVM report, is currently at risk.^[5] After maintaining 24 ECTS in your first year, the percentage of students getting a diploma increases significantly. This number stabilizes around 30 ECTS. As expected, the number of students obtaining a degree is lower for students who obtained less study points in their first year, but around the cutoff of 42 ECTS this difference is not significant.^[4] By lowering the BSA to 30 ECTS, we want students to be able to follow the second year courses in their second year, if they obtained 30 ECTS or more in their first study year.

We do not want the BSA to be postponed for one year, just like two years ago. Postponing the BSA will mean that students are in principle not able to do second-year courses in their second study year. The pressure on students will then continue for another year, because students still have no certainty about whether they can continue with their studies, with all the consequences that entail. The advantage of lowering the BSA compared to postponing the BSA is that students have more clarity and certainty after the first year and they are able to follow second-year courses.

- Take the B out of BSA (an advisory study advice)

In the case that the binding element is removed from the BSA, students will receive study advice halfway through, and at the end of the year that is only advisory. With a negative BSA, the student can choose to continue with the study. The BSA only remains a recommendation and the choice remains with the student, which gives the student more responsibility for his study choice. The House of Representatives accepted a motion regarding the BSA. It stated that the government should enter into dialogue with educational institutions to replace the binding study advice with advice that is only advisory.

Response time

According to Article 9.32 paragraph 2 of the WHW, the Executive Board must give a written response to a proposal made by the University Council within three months. We would like however to see a response from the Executive Board before March 1st, because we want to give students clarity about the situation as soon as possible. Two years the communication about the BSA being postponed caused a lot of confusion and uncertainty among first-year students. In addition, March 1st is an important date for students who are currently in the first year of their studies.

If a student stops before March 1st, the student will not receive a binding study advice (BSA) and he can start the same study again in September. If a student stops after March 1st, he will receive a BSA. If this is negative, he can no longer register for this study program or another study program with an identical first year for the upcoming three years. Incidentally, the student may enroll in the same study program at a different institution. Last year this same request was made and the clarity came very much on time, taking a lot of stress away from students.

Communication

Just as last year we want to ask the board to have a complete communication plan, which means to communicate their decision clearer and on multiple channels. Student Party SAM believes that every first-year student should receive at least one email containing and explaining the decision about the BSA. An announcement should be posted on the Canvas page of every first-year student. Next to these two means of communication, an update should be posted on the FAQ page of Tilburg University. All the information regarding the decision about the BSA should be available and communicated before March 1st 2022.

Conclusion

In these, sadly still quite uncertain times we find it irresponsible to burden students with the current BSA. Reports have proven that student wellbeing has suffered massively under the Covid-19 crisis and the effects of this are still very much visible. We cannot expect our students to perform at their best when their mental wellbeing is at such a low point. The current infection rates are still constantly fluctuating and measures are still being tightened. Some courses are provided online, others offline and some switch. Students still have to miss too many of their lectures and / or exams because they themselves are infected or because they have to quarantine for multiple days. That is why we request the Executive Board the following:

- To lower the BSA to 30 ECTS or to make the BSA nonbinding (advisory) for every study program at Tilburg University.
- To make a decision before March 1st 2022
- To communicate the decision via email, canvas and the FAQ page on the Tilburg University website before March 1st 2022.