

The Netherlands: Studenten helpen scholieren (Students help students)

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Type of intervention: non-governmental

Website: www.studentenhelppenscholieren.nl

General description

Studenten helpen scholieren (SHS) is a digital platform that provides online tutoring and a range of additional online learning services to students in middle and high school. SHS was set up by four young professionals immediately after lockdown measures were announced.

SHS offers free online tutoring – with the possibility of making small donations – to middle and high school students. University students can apply on the SHS website as a tutor in a subject in which they excel, while middle and high school students can sign up to ask for help with one or more specific subjects. First, a basic algorithm connects both parties, and then it is up to them to schedule a trial online tutoring session to ensure that it is constructive.

SHS also offers a range of digital learning materials that were made available for free by publishers. A dedicated chatbot helps middle and high school students with their learning skills, while middle and high school students and university students can participate in interactive webinars (masterclasses) to improve their learning or tutoring skills.

SHS was initially set up to help high school students in their last year of secondary education prepare for their final exams (the ‘central exams’). After the government announced that the central exams would be cancelled, the initiative broadened

The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



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2 | THE NETHERLANDS: STUDENTEN HELPEN SCHOLIEREN (STUDENTS HELP STUDENTS)

its scope to include secondary education as such. In practice, mostly high school students take advantage of the initiative.

Main problems addressed

The initiative recognised the importance of the continuity of education during the lockdown, and aims to support the most vulnerable children during this time. The platform provides free services, so that every child can benefit, thanks to university students offering their tutoring services free of charge, the government providing a subsidy, and publishers and software providers offering free licenses.

While schools struggle to keep everyone involved, many children have difficulty learning at home. The initiative takes into account that such difficulties affect the quality of education, especially for students from a disadvantaged background whose parents cannot provide academic support nor private tutoring. (It should be noted that private tutoring – ‘shadow education’ – is becoming increasingly popular in the Netherlands, raising questions about the accessibility for vulnerable children. During the lockdown, existing learning gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children could increase.)

The initiative does not aim to replace regular education. Instead, it offers online tutoring in addition to teachers teaching on line.

Mobilising and developing resources

SHS was launched right after lockdown measures were announced. The founders started with a simple website, based on Google Forms, to match tutors (university students) with middle and high school students, who could register on the website. The first 300 matches were made manually. The founders wanted to replace the initial website with a more professional platform with more functions than just a matching tool. As no affordable digital platform was available, they built their own within two weeks, saving a lot of time. Companies sponsored the initiative by offering free licenses. During the crisis, the Ministry of Education subsidised the initiative and promoted the platform through their network (e.g. newsletter, website).

SHS relies on university students’ willingness to volunteer. At the start, the founders hoped and expected that university students would offer their help, as they had more time on their hands during the lockdown. SHS also relies on heightened media attention due to the lockdown. Publishers and other digital service providers were willing to participate as well, for example, by offering free licenses for digital learning materials, such as digital books and preparation materials for exams. The platform also offers a chatbot that is specialised in learning skills. Middle and high school students can ask the chatbot questions, for example, about how to manage their learning schedule. With the help of a more advanced algorithm and a decision tree, the chatbot provides answers, tips and feedback to these students. SHS does not pay for the use of such digital services.

SHS uses social media to recruit university students to tutor and reach out to middle and high school students. The initiative immediately received a lot of positive (media) attention. National television and newspapers discussed the initiative, which even led to the King of the Netherlands making a public statement of appreciation.

Fostering effective use and learning

SHS offers interactive webinars (masterclasses) to volunteer university students in order to ensure the quality of the online tutoring sessions. At the same time, middle and high school students can follow masterclasses to improve their learning skills (‘learning how to learn’), which are especially useful for distance learning.

In order to guarantee the quality of online tutoring, a video connection between the tutors and students is necessary. In an ideal situation, SHS would have provided even more advanced features, such as interactive whiteboards but no free licenses were available. The founders were aware that accessing the platform would be a problem for children without digital devices. For that reason, they shared information about other organisations that may provide free computers.

The website is a continuing work in progress. For example, online video call software is being developed so that the tutors and middle or high school students no longer need external applications. This will also create a solution for central and secure data storage.

Implementation challenges

In spite of intensive efforts to build a proper platform, SHS has experienced difficulties reaching its target audience. They benefited from social media and media attention, but it proved challenging to build a network with schools and teachers. Such a network is highly relevant, especially if media attention wanes after the crisis. Targeting vulnerable students is difficult, as they are more difficult to mobilise. It is also a challenge to get on the radar of other organisations that might be able to get into contact with those students.

A last challenge was to motivate teachers to support the initiative. Framing the message turned out to be particularly important, as teachers were sometimes unaware of the background and goal of SHS and perceived it as competition. For that reason, SHS made it as clear as possible that the initiative proposes to help teachers with additional one-on-one tutoring instead of replacing them.

Monitoring success

After about a month, around 1 000 matches were made with 700 middle or high school students (some of them receive help for different subjects). SHS did not set out a specific target in the beginning. It tries to target vulnerable children but does not verify the student's background.

During the crisis, the initiative focused solely on reaching out to university students to tutor and middle or high school students to learn, and on making online tutoring possible. No monitoring was set up. Down the road, an evaluation system could be set up, for example, one that is comparable to commercial websites.

Adaptability to new contexts

The initiative could be adapted to other contexts. However, the success of the initiative is partly due to the circumstances of the crisis as university students were willing to volunteer, and publishers and software providers offered free licenses, which also increased media coverage. Under normal circumstances, such an edge might not be available meaning that an initiative like this would be more costly. Funding is necessary in order to offer free online tutoring and other online learning services, especially as tutoring is usually expensive and a source of income. With sufficient funding, an initiative like SHS might be a solution to providing tutoring to vulnerable children in the future.

The main investment is the launch of the digital platform. Even though SHS was set up within a couple of weeks, the founders warned that under normal circumstances, it takes considerably longer to set up a comparable platform.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Invest in an adequate digital platform, and see what relevant services are already available.
2. Build on a network of schools and teachers in order to reach (vulnerable) students.
3. Use charity to increase media coverage and willingness to participate or donate.
4. Restrict the scope of the platform to secondary education. Primary education requires more conditions, such as screening and interaction with parents.
5. Co-operate with other organisations, such as those that provide digital devices to students, and ask them for help reaching out to students.
6. Pay attention to the communication strategy, especially with regard to teachers, and make sure that it is clear that tutoring is additional to regular education and not a replacement.
7. Use social media effectively to reach out to children.
8. Pay attention to the privacy of children and the security of personal data.

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