

## **Showing Skills & Talents: Developing a Plus-document**

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"...Be that child that throws the starfish back into the sea" – is the motto under which this project is worked on. It draws upon a Singaporean story about a child on the beach that is throwing starfish back into the ocean. An old man sees the child and asks, "Why are you doing that?" The child replies, "The tide is going out and if I don't throw them back into the ocean soon, they will die." The old man shakes his head and says, "Don't you realize, there are hundreds more starfish? You cannot possibly make a difference." But the child picks up another starfish and throws it back into the ocean. Then the child smiles and says, "I made a difference for that one." This is an analogy for education in general. We also believe that education is the process of making a difference in one student's life at a time, of seeing each student as an individual. We want to help them to develop in their own personal way, and show their uniqueness. This process is what we aimed to encourage and support through this project.



This project was organized through Maastricht University's PREMIUM student honors program in collaboration with Casper Gardeniers, the coordinator of the bilingual department at the Porta Mosana College. PREMIUM offers students the chance to work on a real-life case for a company, governmental organization or NGO in a multidisciplinary setting. The mission of the project was to assist in developing a Plus-document for the students of the Porta Mosana College, which will be required for the new decentralized university admission system in the Netherlands. The ministry has reached out to the professional educational, and pedagogical community to envision concepts on what this "Plus-document" should include, and how it can be implemented.

As a front-runner in innovative learning the high school Porta Mosana College aims to develop a Plus-document that integrates 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Through this, students will achieve increased awareness of themselves as well as the world. They are encouraged to practice vital skills in daily life that are needed to become a productive

21<sup>st</sup> century global citizen. One way of incorporating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into the Plus-document is to have students focus on the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills they gained during their extra-curricular activities, and then determine which would be most pertinent to the course of study they want to apply to. This can also function as a reflection and self-development mechanism to help students discover as well as show their unique strengths and interests. Students can also become more aware of the learning opportunities, and value in their extracurricular experiences. We believe that the Plus-document should show such development, and simultaneously function as a guiding mechanism for high school students preparing to go to university. It should be a document that shows admission officials what students are capable of, their qualities, achievements, and ultimately, what makes their profile unique.

As the format of the Plus-document has not yet been finalized, we saw this as a great opportunity to go beyond the university application process and design a Plus-document that also assists students in their personal development during high school and beyond. Our vision goes beyond just providing a Plus-document for students to work on at the end of year six. It should be an accompanying innovative tool, both in its design and purpose, which students are motivated to continue working on, and develop in. It should provide guidance, and support, for the students in order to know what, and how they want to present themselves on the Plus-document. Therefore, our Plus-document process starts in VWO 4, and can continue to VWO 6 and beyond, as the process can be extended indefinitely. All the information will be saved for the students so that they can continuously track and revise their progress. However, for most students, the endpoint will be the physical Plus-document used for their university application.

After academic background research, and gathering perspectives from stakeholders like Porta Mosana College, its students, universities, as well as best practices from around the world, a prototype for the Plus-document was developed. Its defining element is that it consists of three layers, to facilitate a personal development process that lasts from VWO 4 to 6. The base layer is the Reflection Layer. It is private for each student, so that they can feel safe to engage in deeper reflection. In this layer the students will also make their notes about their activities, and reflect on the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills they gained through them. This could be done in numerous ways, for example in a diary or video-blog format. The students can then choose the most important elements to then be transferred to the final layer, the official Plus-document, which the universities will receive. The middle layer is the

Working Layer where students can share with fellow students, teachers or mentors to gain support or feedback. To make this process more interactive, we envision the format of a visual landscape, like a video game, with different landmarks representing the students' different strengths, activities, skills or weaknesses. The final layer would be the official Plus-document itself, which builds on the development process captured in the prior two layers.



Our final prototype for the final layer, or the official Plus-document, consists of two pages. The first page is meant to display the personal features of the high school student, by inviting them to finish questions related to the personal ambitions and character of the student. The second page is meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the activities, the skills developed, as well as a statistical overview (pie chart and graph) of the student's development. These two pages combine the three layers of the Plus-document process into one final result that can be handed in with the university application.

In the future, we recommend further exploration into how the Plus-document could be improved, and whether the Plus-document process could be made electronic. The pie chart and progress tracker included in the prototype could be created automatically for students using a computer program, and could reveal more detailed

information when clicked on. The e-document could also be designed to allow students to upload images, videos, and music into different sections of the final Plus-document. This allows students to show their skills and development in an even more personalized, engaging, and innovative way. Lastly, a more ambitious recommendation is to look into designing the Landscape Layer of the Plus-document in the form of a video game. Students can then design personalized visual landscapes, creating an interactive component where fellow students, parents and teachers can provide feedback. Such enhancements would likely be more engaging for the students, and link the three layers more closely together.

All these ideas and recommendations would give the Plus-document much depth. We envision the Plus-document as an innovative tool to help students understand themselves better, and develop personal strengths. In the end, it should show universities how the students' unique profiles make them suitable for their chosen course of study. We worked on this project to lay a foundation, and hope that further explorations regarding the conceptualization and implementation for the Plus-document will be actively pursued.

*Note: PREMIUM is the honours programme for master's students of Maastricht University. PREMIUM offers students the chance to work on a real-life case for a company, governmental organization or NGO in an multidisciplinary setting. For this project students Manisha Kalikadien, Verena Pachler, Rachel Phoa and Charlotte Raue, worked on an assignment for the Porta Mosana College in Maastricht. They were guided by competence coach Renee Speijcken and project mentors Arie van der Lugt and Anne Schepers.*