

Study Portals



Edwin van Rest,
CEO - Study Portals

Industry: Education

Mission statement: "Every year, we change the lives of millions of students. We enable them to explore all their study options in one place and to find the best fit study programme that matches their needs, goals, and preferences."

Headquarters: Eindhoven (Klokgebouw 280, 5617 AC Eindhoven)

Founded: 2007

Study Portals is a global study-choice platform that was founded in 2007 to help young people find and compare study opportunities across Europe.

After the enormous success of their initial European Masters degree comparison platform, Mastersportal, co-founder and CEO Edwin van Rest and his team expanded their offering not only into other study domains (Bachelor degrees, short courses, PhDs), but also into other parts of the world.

In 2015, Study Portals opened an office in Boston, Massachusetts, where they have been rapidly growing ever since.

During our recent interview with Edwin, we found out a lot more about Study Portals' story; why they chose Boston, the successes they've had there, and the challenges they've faced along the way.

Key takeaways:

- After five to six years of expanding across the European university sector, the U.S. was a logical next choice in Study Portals' mission of making study choices more transparent for people across the world
- Their Dutch accountancy firm, based in The Netherlands, played a crucial role in helping them get set up in Boston. Through the firm's U.S. partners, the many legal and administrative hurdles of setting up a U.S. branch of Study Portals were taken care of
- According to Edwin, the biggest challenge faced during this process was that of actually penetrating one of the biggest markets in the world, the United States
- By being in Boston, Studyportals has engaged with clients like Harvard and MIT, and has expanded their global footprint through a vast network of partners, clients, and education experts



Study Portals team

Where the story starts - why move to Boston?

Initially founded in 2007, Study Portals grew exponentially within the European higher education sector. After expanding and diversifying their platform to accommodate for other fields of study, from Bachelor degrees all the way to distance learning and preparation courses, the logical next step was to take their platform global.

Apart from the immense market potential that existed outside of Europe, from Asia all the way to South America, the idea of globally expanding aligned closely with Study Portals' missions of making education choices easier for people around the world.

Within the U.S., Boston, MA was selected for its global connectivity potential (with direct flights to and from Amsterdam), its cost considerations, and most importantly, its prominence within the higher education sector. Also, due to its large amount of leading universities and tertiary institutes, Boston was a relatively easy place to find high-quality talent with experience in the education sector to join the Study Portals team.

The Nitty Gritty:

Arguably, the success of a move like this comes down to the details, especially for startups. Legal, administrative, and financial considerations need to be prioritised in order to ensure a smooth landing, regardless of the market potential.

As Edwin mentioned, Study Portals' accountancy firm, which is based in The Netherlands, played a crucial role in helping them get set up in Boston. Through the firm's U.S. partners, the many legal and administrative challenges of setting up a U.S. branch of Study Portals were taken care of.

Especially from a legal perspective, Edwin emphasised the importance of working with experts when dealing with legal matters, from Visas to business documentation. He notes that "within the U.S., legal structures differ across states, requiring a lot of legal input and resources. This adds layers of complexity that we aren't necessarily used to in Europe".

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Getting help on the ground

A crucial component to moving his startup to the U.S. was taking into account the organisations which exist to help people like Edwin, and Dutch startups in particular.

For example, he mentioned a Dutch-government agency, RVO (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland), which serves Dutch entrepreneurs through grants, sponsorships, and other forms of assistance. Edwin and his team only found out about RVO after their move, but wished they had known about them sooner.

An organisation which they did however leverage, was a tech-hub called Learn Launch, which helped Study Portals with a smoother landing in Boston by assisting them with things like finding an office space, facilitating networking events, and providing a platform to grow into the market.

Regarding on-the-ground setup and the question of which U.S. state to choose, Edwin mentioned that, "In many U.S. states, they have economic development institutions that try to attract foreign investment into their state, and which therefore offer interesting tax incentives and other benefits to attract international entrepreneurs".

In other words, it's important to do your research on the local startup ecosystems before choosing where to grow your startup from within the U.S.

Which challenges did Study Portals face?

According to Edwin, the biggest challenge faced during this process was that of actually penetrating one of the biggest markets in the world, the United States.

Although Study Portals had secured partners like Oxford and Cambridge University, they were operating in an entirely new context, which resulted in their team having to essentially “start from scratch” after touching down in Boston. This included things like building a team, building client relationships, working on partnerships, and ultimately developing a network that could support the business as they grew within the U.S. market.

Another challenge which Study Portals faced was the complexity of being set up in multiple countries across the world, and mediating between different time zones, languages, cultures and locations - with university partners in 114 different countries.

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The cultural and systemic differences between the U.S. and the Netherlands was also something for Edwin and his team to acclimatise to. For example, Edwin learnt over time to adopt a more direct leadership style with his team in the U.S., as opposed to the consensus-driven model of work that persists in the Netherlands, where the culture requires “buy in” from the entire team. He notes that “In the U.S. university system, things are more hierarchical. Therefore, a top-down approach is a lot more effective than a bottom-up one.”

A positive experience overall

Through their move to Boston, Study Portals have received global coverage, presenting them with the opportunity to engage with clients like Harvard and MIT, and to truly call themselves a global platform.

Apart from the growth of Study Portals itself thanks to the strategic move to Boston, Edwin and his team have also bolstered their reputation as market leaders in Europe, and have managed to grow into other parts of North America and the rest of the world too.

Edwin's overall impression?

“From an entrepreneurial perspective, the U.S. provides a wealth of opportunity, learning experiences, and a shift in perspective - opening up the space to truly “dream big.”

Some of his most important advice for other entrepreneurs looking to enter the U.S. market?

“Travel there, test the market, and be sure that you can capture enough of the market to keep you in the market. Find launching customers to go to market with. Crucially, make sure you're in a position to do business in the U.S. from a legal point of view. Put time and money into the visa process. From an early point, talk to visa experts.”

Impressions of Boston?

“As a city, Boston provides a space for a healthy work-life balance, and is a great setting for companies working within the education sector.”