

1 INTRODUCTION:

The breakfastclub with the theme ‘Healthy studying’ was held on December 14, 2018. With this breakfastclub, the LUS tried to see where study stress emerges, what already has been done by the university to lessen this, and what students know of this. It also aimed to assess what students know about the provided help by the faculties for students with studying disabilities (think ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, autism, etc.) and what they feel should be improved.

We had two guest speakers attending our breakfastclub: Prof.dr. J.P. van der Leun, the dean of the Faculty of Law; and The Young Consultant (De Kleine Consultant).

A note of caution should be added since not all faculties were represented during this breakfastclub due to the closeness to the exam period. This might give a distorted view on the problems students encounter, since not all faculties work the same. The represented faculties were: Faculty of Archaeology, FGGa, FSW, FGW and the Faculty of Law.

1.1 PROF.DR. J.P. (JOANNE) VAN DER LEUN, DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF LAW:

The dean of the faculty of law, Joanne, told us that she did not always think the same way about stress and studying of working. She used to be a bit sceptical about this subject because she worked a lot and did not have problems like these. However, when she met students during her time as student coach, she saw that all these talented young students struggled with stress. In 2016 Joanne became a Dean on the faculty of law. She had the possibility to make the difference for students.

Joanne noticed that there are a couple of things going on. The general idea of increasing the problem is by hiring more psychologists on the faculty. But is this the right way to reduce the problem? She thinks it is more important to prevent the problem of stress and depressions. Besides this, she noticed that people want to have more rules and policies about healthy studying, but she thinks we need to take a look at a couple of other things first.

1. Not everyone is dealing with the same issues
2. Staff of the faculty needs to be involved as well, to make sure this needs priority
3. Not all of the problem’s students deal with is due to things about their study, future or faculty.
4. Competition is not only on a national level but also on an international level (China and Indonesia for example).
5. A lot of students think that they need very high standards to find a job, but not everyone is looking for the same kind of jobs.
6. An option to take retakes by grades from 5,5 or higher is not always a good thing in this case.

So what do we need to do?

We used to have someone how speaks for all the students in their introduction week of the faculty of law. He was a very good speaker but an overachiever. Now we chose the let someone speak who has more like a mid-career. This is not only for the new students but for all students. Besides that I made sure that we show a video about people dealing with a burn-out. And show the students that you are allowed to say I am not perfect. It is very important to

figure out what fits you and what you want to become. Peer pressure is a big thing and that makes it important to realise that there is a lot of differentiation, different skill programmes and a big labour market to choose where you want to be a part of.

I was not very clear how other faculties deal with this problem and what they already achieved.

One of the students, an international student from America, said that publishing grades on blackboard is a weird thing. In one way you will compare yourself to other students, and however your student number is not your name, it is not completely un-identifying. He said that pressure by studying is more about a limited amount of time to look for what you wanted to do after. There needs to be more time to make a good decision.

The dean said that there are so many opportunities within the University, to look for what you want to do or who you want to be.

1.2 THE YOUNG CONSULTANT

Two representatives of the Young Consultant talked to us about the 'four burner' theory. This theory sees life as a gas stove, you cannot put pans on all four of the burners and you cannot have them all burn equally hard. That is why students (and other people who want to be successful) need to decide which burners they want to focus on: family, friends, work or health. One simply cannot give attention to all of these burners on one day, every day.

This makes one think about how one should manage these burners, because it is not an option to never see your family again or to not work anymore but still achieve your goals. This is also what is the key: setting goals. If you set a goal, you know what you have to do to achieve it. We practiced with this by writing down at least three goals we want to have achieved in 10 weeks, with why we want to achieve this and how. These were put in envelopes and will be sent when the time is there (around the 20th of February). Hopefully the students will have achieved their goals, which will give them motivation to write down new goals to achieve.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS PER SUBJECT AFTER THE DISCUSSION:

2.1 STUDY ADVISOR, TEACHER AND MENTOR APPROACHABILITY

Students feel that study advisors are less approachable than they should. It was mentioned that the sentiment within the student body is that one only goes to the study advisor when already facing study or stress related problems. The study advisors are also there to help students with choosing a suitable curriculum and preventing an overload of stress within this academic path. This needs to be made more clear.

Another point made was about the role of mentors and teachers in also aiding students in need. Students often are reluctant with approaching teachers with questions since they are busy people with a lot more to do than only attending the students. This gives students the feeling that they should not bother teachers with their questions, but figure it out without help. This can result into students not being able to pass since their understanding of the subject was insufficient due to not asking questions. It is thus necessary to make clear to both students and teaching staff that lecturers should be approachable when students have questions about courses and need help. This also seems to be the case with mentors.

Mentors should be able to help students with the transition from high school (middelbare school) into university life, both with study related issues as well as stress from not being able to do everything all at once (think of exercise, eating healthy, having a social life, and get good grades). How does one choose what is important and on what should students focus? A mentor is very important and helpful in this stage, however, mentors either seem to busy or do not completely support students in this transit. It is assumed that the students just automatically adjust themselves to their new lives. A solution could be an appointment with the mentor on a fixed date, for example twice per semester.

Another way this could be improved is by having a presentation during the introduction weeks (EL CID and OWL) about student life, but in a more realistic way. Of course, studying abroad and being a part of an association should play a role in this, but also the more difficult parts of student life should be addressed. This can make a lasting impression on first year students who will know they are not the only ones facing these problems.

2.2 GRADING SYSTEM AND COMPARING TENDENCY

A few remarks were made regarding the grading of assignments, essays and exams. Most of these issues are related with the tendency of students to compare themselves to others, mostly in grades and academic accomplishments. Students feel that they always need to get the highest grades, even though teachers try to make clear that this is not necessary. A six on your diploma is not the end of the world. This is also the case with retakes, students fear retakes since it is a sign of failure. More attention should be given to these issues in trying to make clear that a lower grade or a retake does not make you a bad student and that not all students are the same. Comparing is not always the solution. It is important to talk to students about failure, and that this is not a bad thing.

Something that was striking is a remark from a student, telling us that students' grades will be published on Blackboard with the student number for anyone in the course to see. Even though it is somewhat anonymous, it still gives an opportunity for comparing, something that could be the core of pressure and stress. It would be better if this would be prevented by

posting the grades through the grade system provided in blackboard so only the graded student can see this. If this is not possible, usis is also sufficient.

Another solution for comparing grades is a pass or fail system in which students do not get a grade or a 'good', but simply a 'pass' or 'fail'. Of course this method is not suited for all assignments, but for smaller assignments with less significance for a particular grade this could be feasible. However, a downside to this is that students might focus less on these assignments and only do the minimum to get a 'pass'. Still, it could be a good step into the right direction.

2.3 DURATION OF STUDY AND CHOICES WITHIN

Some students indicated that the duration allotted for finishing a degree also contributes to increased pressure and stress within the student body. In the short period of three years for bachelors, one needs to decide in which direction they want to go with their studies. Within these three years, a lot of choices need to be made regarding the curriculum, including electives, minors, internships, whether to study abroad or not, extracurricular courses etc. These choices lead to more stress, because not all students are aware of the possibilities within the university, or because they need more help from someone with a different perspective (e.g. a study advisor/ mentor). However, as mentioned before, students feel that they should only go to these advisors when they are already in trouble. Students should be supported more in making these choices, since they are not the ones with the experience to successfully set out an academic path and/or future career opportunities. This could be addressed by increasing awareness and visibility of study advisors around the time of crucial choices.

Moreover, some students offered the solution of making the bachelors four years instead of three, so that students will have more time for these decisions and to focus on their studies. They hope that this could lessen the feeling of constantly racing against the clock. They felt that students who need the four years will be less stressed, while students who feel that they can finish their bachelor's within three years can do so.

On a more positive note, it was also remarked that students feel more motivated for courses which they chose themselves such as the honours courses. This shows that when students are given more choices/freedom within their curriculum, motivation will ensue.

2.4 PSYCHOLOGISTS/COUNSELLORS

Even though according to professor doctor Joanne van der Leun sending students to psychologists should not be the first measure implemented to aid students with pressure and stress, some students still feel that there is a shortage of psychologists or counsellors within the faculty who can attend to the students who need it. As a solution to the shortage, they suggest that the university could call upon willing psychology students in the final stages of their studies to play the role of counsellors for students. This can be seen as a win-win situation as the psychology students will get experience, and students who need to talk can be helped with their issues.

The university has student psychologists. But it is not very clear when you can come to them with your problems. Because for some problems it is maybe better to go to a study advisor or the international office. It would be a good idea to give every student a guide for physical health when they come to Leiden university. Especially the international students have no idea where to go when they have mental problems. It is also important to inform students

actively about mental health. If students know that it is common amongst students to feel stressed.

It was also indicated that students feel the need to talk about their issues regarding stress, study and study disabilities, something that they might not want to do with their study advisors/coördinators. A 'support' or talk group in which students share their experiences and concerns could be a solution for this.

2.5 COURSE PLANNING

One of the students mentioned 'the original problem' which is causing stress within the student body. In their opinion the original problem seems to be the bad planning of exams, for example just after the holidays. This makes students feel stressed about their exams while they should get a break from this stress. Another example is the overwhelming amount of exams in a short period of time. This could be altered by, for example, only having one or two exams per week.

It also seems that the peak periods per study are different and when following courses at another faculty this could turn into permanent stress since assignments are due halfway other courses. It is also a problem for honours classes since all faculties have different time schedules and the honours courses are thus planned late in the evening. The process of harmonisation within the university has already started and this could help both students following courses at other faculties, as well as honours students. Another factor is the distribution of courses, some study blocks are full of courses, causing a lot of pressure and stress, while other study blocks are rather empty. An equal distribution of courses could relieve some of the students of their stress issue, however, it is understood that this is not always possible due to teacher availability and set curricular agreements.

2.6 OTHER GENERAL REMARKS

When asking the students about their knowledge of what the university and faculties facilitate for students with learning disabilities, it became evident that this was very unclear. However, the students that were asked did not indicate that they also experienced learning disabilities.

Some students indicated that housing/accommodation is one of the factors contributing to the stress that the student body faces. We are aware that housing is an issues that has been addressed multiple times already and of which the university is also aware and working on.