

Introduction

On the 18th of November the Leiden University Studentplatform (LUS) meeting on student participation and feedback took place. Aside from the eight student representatives of LUS, there were 13 students representing all faculties; both Dutch and international. The LUS committee selected this topic due to relatively low response rates for evaluation forms and the recent developments regarding the *Nationale Studenten Enquête* (NSE). Among students there is a feeling that their feedback is not heard, let alone implemented. Which is in contrast to the ambitions of Leiden University to increase the roll of student feedback in creating and implementing policy. The Club therefore focussed on all the different levels of student participation and feedback within Leiden University.

During the discussion the following questions were discussed:

- *Are student participation bodies visible and accessible, and how can this be improved?*
- *How should student representatives be chosen?*
- *How should your feedback be treated?*

Talk by Maarten Wille *student at LUMC, active in OLC en University Council*

Maarten questions whether or not we need to keep trying to reach the 'passive' students. If they wanted to be heard, why would they be so passive? He feels that student participation serves three goals: to give information about issues that students experience, to be a 'think tank' and to serve the interests of students. It is important to have a connection with your fellow students, every opinion should be heard, but this is one of the hardest things to achieve. He thinks Leiden is already doing quite a good job but thinks that some points can be improved: Firstly, students should be more aware of their rights and the implementation of their feedback. Secondly, there should be more continuity in student participation so new students can learn from the experienced.

Talk by Roberto van den Heuvel *Professor in law, chair of 'De grote OLC' (Education committee)*

Roberto has noticed that even in OLC's, not that many people speak up. He thinks students expect quality and should therefore also want to have influence upon that quality. As a teacher, you want enthusiastic and motivated students, and there you should also strive for quality. These are the people you need in an OLC. To have this, the OLC has to show that it's easily accessible. However, even as a very

motivated OLC, you still need to have time to improve aspects. That's why there is a 'general' OLC at the faculty of Law, to achieve more in broader aspects which are of interest for multiple smaller OLC's. Aside from that, he proposed the use of subgroups within OLC's who focus on visibility of the OLC and the creation of year reports.

Visibility and Accessibility of the student representatives

The OLC is considered the most visible student participation body. The Faculty and University Council are seen as the least visible organs. These councils are only visible to the relatively small network surrounding the members of those councils, or during the election week. There is a shared feeling of not knowing what the councils and the student parties do, as there is little to no information that students receive.

There is the feeling that OLC's act too slow. If a course needs to be improved right away (e.g. halfway through the course), they'd rather send an e-mail to the teacher than the OLC. Aside from that, when submitting a complaint, privacy is a concern for some, as it is not clear in what confidence they can share their issues with a course or teacher.

Overall, it's quite confusing when you can contact a certain body, because there are a lot of them and it's often unclear what the differences in the tasks are. The 'route' to access the student representatives and different types of bodies should be clearer for all students. The faculty *Wegwijskaat* is therefore seen as a great initiative. An other idea would be to have one link for questions and remarks, and have a student assistant send them to the right department.

Active students (who are student representatives themselves) can reach their audience through social media outlets and magazines. But there are some struggles: active students say they feel they can only reach the rest of the students when they achieve something that is physically visible for everyone, like water fountains. But of course, in education, a lot of topics that are discussed and are worked on are not directly visible for all students. It is suggested that they could improve their visibility by presenting themselves on the faculty screens and send out an e-mail to the students 2 or 3 times per year that communicates their goals, achievements, and activities.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- More visibility of OLC's and FR through Blackboard, Social media, the university website, and faculty television screens where they can share updates about things that are achieved;
- Implement subgroups within OLC's to improve their effectiveness;
- Have an anonymous online form for students to formulate their complaints;
- There should be regular emails from the OLC to students with the results of provided feedback;
- OLC members should receive more time for their function to improve their visibility and to give updates on student feedback.

Representativity

There are multiple methods to select new student representatives for committees such as the OLC. There are both cons and pros about the methods of selecting student representatives.

When using elections as a method of selecting, it could deter students from participating. Since elections are for a large part about who has the broadest network and friends, which was generally regarded as not preferable. It could be stated that elections are a too subjective method.

However, some students felt that elections are better than selections, as elections give you more the feeling that, as a student, you have had a say in who is allowed to enter the OLC or councils. Even though most of the time only active students are chosen and the percentage of voting students is low, some students feel that this is still the best option of the two. There is the consensus that elections should be made clearer: There should be more awareness about the elections, for instance via promotion in (first year) lectures. It is also suggested that there should be an incentive for voting, just like with the NSE.

Interviews are another method which has the favor of inactive students because the best fit people will be chosen. An interview can assess whether someone has affinity with the topics.

Adding to this, it is remarked that some students participating in an OLC are often not present during meetings. This harms the representativity of the OLC. Therefore, to decide whether they are eligible for reelection and a reward, attendance should be taken into account.

At this moment, not everyone feels represented in the university. It is noted that faculty consultative groups would help to increase the feeling for everyone that they are represented. Also, a significant group does not live in Leiden, which also hinders their participation for bodies like the OLC.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- The student bodies should be introduced in (first year) lectures;
- OLC's should invest in visibility, with the recommendation of subgroups;
- There should be an investigation into the ideal selection process for OLC members;
- Not only student parties, but also the university should increase its efforts to improve the turnout for the university council elections, for instance via incentives for voting;
- The university could implement buddy systems in which active students bring a less active student along;
- The university could implement a random selection of students for organs where input of students is mandatory;
- An independent inspection to review the performance of OLC's and their members.

Feedback

The collection of student feedback across Leiden University is diverse in terms of how and when. Often forms are spread out over the tables during exams, but this has drawbacks. Students are often tired of their exam and don't take the time for feedback. They are furthermore influenced by their performance on the exam and due to exams usually taking place weeks after the course, some feedback may have been forgotten.

In other instances, the forms are filled out during the last lecture or workgroup, in which the teacher leaves the room, providing a greater turnout and a more accurate response. It is noted however, that next to these indirect questionnaires direct, oral feedback should not be forgotten. Discussions between teachers and students will create applicable solutions (approved by both sides) much faster.

The feedback loop is not perceived as closed. Students barely know what is done with it, unless they hear it from students who follow the course a year later. If this would be improved, it would also increase the response rate of questionnaires, as students will know that the results will be looked at and used.

Students have mixed feelings about the NSE. It can be very long, and the questions are sometimes too broad, which makes it difficult to interpret a question in your specific situation. Also, as the results are very quantitative, it sometimes doesn't really give a proper representation. However, they appreciate the fact that the NSE asks questions on topics which aren't asked about in course specific forms. They feel that it does have value, but not necessarily as if it will still make a difference for their own education.

The discussion resulted in the following recommendations:

- Close the feedback loop, get back to students on what is done with the feedback. This can be done by an email from the OLC at the end of every semester with their findings and accomplishments, or by the teachers themselves who inform their students of the changes to the course;
- Make giving feedback possible at different moments other than only the end of a course, for instance via electronic forms posted on platforms visible to all students;
- The design of the NSE can be improved to motivate more students to fill it in. It could be made more tailored per study program, faculty and university to enhance the effectiveness of the results.