

Student Well-Being Advice



For a discussion and explanation of the advice, please see the LUS report on Student well-being. For more information contact: lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl

The placement of studies

Reconsidering where different studies are placed, in order to keep in mind the negative effects that can occur through the creation of bubbles. This has particular relevance for Campus The Hague but also applies to building complexes in Leiden.



More interdisciplinary courses

As discussed in the report, bubbles can be an important source of stress. Interdisciplinarity is one way to make bubbles more permeable. Offering more courses where students from different studies and faculties learn together, can be one way of implementation.



Central person for communication and promotion routekaart

A central person to oversee all university wide events to prevent overlap. Routekaart is meant for more knowledge, convenience and beter outreach of important events and information concerning students.



Dutch language classes

Integration of international students is important for many reasons. Feeling integrated is also crucial for student well-being.



Time-management framework

This university-wide framework should be set up by a focus group with participation from all faculties, to develop guidelines on when to place deadlines, plan exams and how to also create free time for students after busy periods. The framework should then be used in the training of university teachers.



LUS Student Well-being report

Introduction

In the first semester of 2020, the LUS examined the topic of student well-being. An issue that has been demanding increased attention even before the current challenging times. The LUS, as a think-tank, has intensively considered the many different facets of the topic, which in the opinion of the LUS, still require more attention. The LUS committee has not only talked about this amongst themselves but has consulted and actively engaged in conversation with many different stakeholders, including students and university staff.

As the University had engaged a designated Well-being Officer at the start of the academic year, to address student well-being needs and requirements of all faculties, the LUS decided to focus on more hands-on topics close to students that may not be reflected through higher-level examination. As part of the 2021 Leiden University Well-being Weeks in January, the LUS organised two community think-tank sessions, one in Dutch and one in English, to invite all students to join the discussion. Unfortunately, only a few students signed up, which led to the cancelation of the second session. The session that took place on January 28th had a very low turn-out with only two Dutch students from the same faculty present to participate in discussion with the LUS members. During the session, two staff members from the university were also present to join the conversation. While the low turn-out of the session, means that this report can by no means be representative of the general student population, it is meant to give ideas and new perspectives on student well-being. The session was structured to examine the question of *what, in a perfect world, a stress-free university would look like*. However, as was also highlighted during the session, a stress-free university is not the goal; instead focus should be places on more realistic and tangible models with the goal of learning how to effectively manage stress. University should be a place where you learn how to deal with stress in a healthy way. The report is structured along the lines of four sub-topics that are discussed in more detail.

Should the reader have any questions about this report, or wishes to get more information about the discussion below, the LUS is always happy to engage in conversation and can be reached under lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl.

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Peer pressure

Peer pressure is one of the primary topics that came up in our conversation about student well-being. It is also an essential part of the issue concerning Campus The Hague and the international student community, an environment in which high levels of peer pressure are often experienced. In general, we noticed that peer pressure is especially apparent in studies and faculties where students are likely to follow very similar career paths. Besides Campus The Hague, the Faculty of Archaeology and the LUMC were identified as places where this is most apparent. In contexts where students have very similar career paths in mind, it can be very stressful to continually be confronted with how much other students are working on their studies in addition to extracurricular activities and part-time jobs. Aside from different communication interventions (see communication part), the LUS advises investigating the possibilities of breaking up these bubbles. Some solutions may include:

- reconsidering where to place different studies for example having some students from The Hague take some classes in Leiden and vice versa so that the programmes/faculties are mixed more frequently. Resulting in increasing the frequency of students with different studying attitudes coming together.
- offering more interdisciplinary courses where students with diverse backgrounds meet each other and can see things from a broader perspective¹.

Generally, we believe that stimulating interdisciplinarity can lead to the reduction of stress. This is part of the motivation for the choice of interdisciplinarity as the LUS topic for Block 3.

Time pressure

The most apparent aspect of stress is time pressure. The setting of deadlines, planning of exams, and sending or receiving emails were identified as important factors of time pressure. Setting deadlines on a Sunday night often means that students work throughout the whole weekend. Deadlines that are set late at night or even at 9 a.m. often encourage students to have unhealthy sleeping patterns. We advise to investigate the effects of different deadlines on student well-being some more. For now, we advise setting deadlines before the weekend as this will allow students to finish their work on weekdays and this may contribute to healthier working and sleeping rhythms. Exam timetabling can have very similar effects on students. Concerning emails, receiving information or updates late at night or during the weekend can sometimes be necessary but should not be the norm. Not only do these late or weekend emails show that teachers also have a hefty workload, but it can also cause additional stress for students. With this in mind, the LUS recommends:

¹ This will of course need to look different for different faculties and might be more challenging for some (e.g. LUMC), but also smaller scale interventions can have an effect.

- the development of a university-wide time management framework. This framework should be written based on more thorough focus group research, including both students and teachers alike. The framework should be developed by all faculties collaboratively to obtain university-wide standards, but to also make room for the needs of individual faculties.
- the inclusion of this framework and general time management skills in the training of university teachers.
- the inclusion of a course on time management, for example as part of the academic skills course or as part of the mentor groups for first year students.

It must be noted that stress can also emerge if there are only minimal lecture and contact hours for students. We observed that this is especially the case for the Faculty of Humanities and to some extent FSW. Our recommendation is:

- to investigate different possibilities for creating more contact hours (during remote teaching online, later in person), for example by setting up more workgroups. This can also be done through peer study groups, for example coordinated by study associations. Contact with peers can not only cause stress, but it is also an essential factor in dealing with stress!

Communication

Quality communication is a vital aspect of student well-being on many different levels. It can help to tackle both time and peer pressure. It is crucial that through the various university communication channels, students feel that they are not alone with being stressed and that they also see positive role models. Positive role models do not only need to be present on social media channels but can also be observed through emails. An example can be an email disclaimer telling the receiver that one typically only replies during working hours as they aim for a healthy work-life balance. When a disclaimer like this is given, a student might be inspired to also try and keep studying for working hours only.

Another factor that the LUS has noticed, both in conversation with other actors concerned with well-being and with our own platform, is that students are hard to reach. The LUS has experienced this first-hand during the lack of participation in the well-being week think-tanks and its social media campaigns, which included topics and initiatives intended for students' benefit. While this undoubtedly relates to many students' current screen tiredness, it is also due to the (sometimes chaotic) communication from the University to students. An example of unfortunate internal university communication was how the Diversity weeks and the Well-

being weeks overlapped, which did not help with promotion or participation level. These two critical subjects should not have been in competition for students' engagement, but rather have supported each other. Additionally, communication of events, initiatives and information to students by University institutions can be challenging, as it is not always clear who the right person to contact is. To tackle this issue, the LUS recommends:

- the establishment of one central person, e.g. in the communication department to which University-wide events are communicated, and who keeps a schedule to prevent unfortunate overlaps.
- to write a "routekaart" that shows who to contact for promotional requests, University-wide, and per faculty. Including how far in advance promotion requests must be received in addition to any tips and tricks regarding how to promote university activities best.

International students

During conversations on student well-being and personal experiences of the LUS members with this topic, it has been suggested that Campus The Hague and international students need to receive special attention when it comes to well-being. One of the reasons for this is that especially international students face additional challenges with regards to their well-being in comparison to Dutch students. These issues include not being able to speak Dutch and therefore, having difficulties integrating, lack of familiarity with the Dutch education system (grading systems) and a heightened performance pressure because they are studying abroad, which can be explained by a.o. heightened tuition fees, having left their family and familiar surroundings behind to obtain a degree and therefore often having to live up to high expectations to justify this decision. With this in mind, the LUS recommends:

- providing free Dutch classes to all non-Dutch speaking students²
- including information on the Dutch education system (grading, general expectations, and where to find help) in the orientation days of English spoken study programmes

Campus The Hague

Besides the challenges faced by all international students at Leiden University, there are specific challenges that students at Campus The Hague face. This is mainly because the Campus is a governance-and-international-topics dominated bubble. The studies located in The Hague all have a very similar direction, which means that for The Hague based students,

² Free Dutch classes are not only important to promote well-being, but are also crucial in many other aspects. This has also already previously been worked out by the LUS, but as it is so crucial, it needs to be mentioned.

there is a lot of competition and a lot of room for comparison. It also means that very like-minded students dominate the social life of students in The Hague. While this can seem like a very positive selling point of the Campus as an International Hub, it also has serious negative side effects: many students live in a bubble in which they have minimal contact with Dutch students (and Dutch students might not feel included or have their social life in Leiden). By staying in narrow groups, this also means that students spend their free-time with the same people they study with and therefore do not have obvious divisions between study-time and free-time - this because they might feel more pressure to pick up the books whenever one of their peers is studying. While this is a somewhat regular part of student life, the major difference between The Hague and Leiden is that, in Leiden, the various student associations bring students with many different backgrounds together. This means that students also get to talk to people that are completely unrelated to their studies in their free time. Staying in a bubble with peers from the same study also means that these like-minded students do not get to see or hear other perspectives; as described in the peer pressure section above, this can be detrimental for stress levels. The LUS therefore recommends to keep the negative consequences of 'student bubbles' into account when further developing Campus The Hague, and to consider advancing the diversity of studies to the Campus. On top of that, we recommend to encourage the promotion of student associations in The Hague, as well as the general establishment of a student social life, as both can bring students from different majors and studies together – the annual HOP week could be utilized to promote student life in The Hague and highlight the different study and student associations.

Topics that were not covered in this report, but that should be kept in mind and need further attention:

- stress faced by first-generation students
- students with special needs