

University Council Election Plan 2021-2022



Dear Student,

We are excited to present you the SOG Election Programme for 2021-22!

The past year has been strange for everyone. The pandemic forced us to live our lives on a few square metres and through the screens of our laptops. Many of the things that normally make student life enjoyable were absent or reduced to a minimum. Like every student, we are looking forward to the end of this challenging situation, and we hope that next year will be full of opportunities to enjoy student life in Groningen.

Throughout its long history, the SOG has always promoted all aspects of being a student. This year, we feel the need to do so more than ever. Our mission is to give everyone the opportunity to develop themselves fully through an active student life in a healthy and outstanding educational environment. This includes support for associations, better integration of international students and concrete goals for the University's sustainable policies.

We look forward to representing your voice in the University Council, and we will do our best to make student life in Groningen better than ever before!

Yours Sincerely,

The SOG Candidate Faction 2021-22,

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What We Stand For

Active Student

Out of all the University Council parties, the SOG is the biggest supporter of active students. We believe that Groningen distinguishes itself from other Dutch student cities through its vibrant and active student community. With over a hundred unique student organisations, every student can join a community where they feel at home. We believe that students can largely arrange their own lives through voluntary cooperation and association, gaining valuable experience and making friends for life along the way. The University should actively support this and give student organisations room to flourish.

Internationalisation

Our University is becoming more and more international, with a third of our students now coming from outside of the Netherlands. We believe that this internationalisation is valuable because it allows us to get in touch with different cultures and worldviews. Studying alongside people from all over the world makes students more tolerant and prepares them to work in intercultural settings later in their lives. We will therefore push the University to do everything possible to ensure that everyone, regardless of nationality, has the potential to thrive in Groningen.

Sustainability

Many students are concerned about the environmental challenges of the future. We believe that everyone, including our University, should do their part to preserve our planet for ourselves and for future generations. We will therefore urge the University to make structural changes in order to include sustainability in all aspects of education and governance.

Education

Good education is paramount to your future success. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us into online education for more than a year now. We believe that digital education is inferior to traditional education because you miss out on the physical interaction and discussion with your peers. Therefore, we will urge the University to re-open physical education as much as possible, with special attention being paid to seminars, practicals and other small-scale education from the start of the next academic year onwards.

Harmony Model

We are convinced that pragmatism is a prerequisite if we want to implement our ideas and bring about actual change. We strive to have a healthy and constructive relationship with the University in which we are open to hearing their suggestions and ideas. At the same time, we will voice our opinions and make our own priorities and ideals clear.

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Active Student

The SOG prides itself on its focus on and support for the active student community in Groningen. What makes student life so unique is that you are free to decide how you want to spend your own time. Every student tries to find his or her own balance between studying and partaking in extracurricular activities. Many students then discover that what they do *outside* of their degree programme is what really makes their student life unforgettable. The events you attend, the friends you make, and the communities you become involved in play a large role in shaping your student years and future. The SOG wants to stimulate this by doing everything we can to let our active student community flourish. Therefore, we will push the University to:

- Give more recognition to student organisations
- Provide more options for flexible studying and more reasonable exam times
- Support national initiatives aimed at reducing student debt
- Give more attention to mental health problems among students

We believe that these measures will help keep our student community vibrant and active so that you can have the opportunities you need to become your best self!

Associations

Student Lounge

Many smaller associations in Groningen are full of energy and creativity but lack the means of bringing their ideas to life. They do not have an office where they can hold regular meetings to discuss their policy. They need to hire expensive rooms when they want to organise a workshop. When they want to record a promotion video they need to borrow a camera from one of their friends. During the past year, the University has tried to assist smaller associations in this. Although we are happy with the initiatives taken, we believe that they would be more effective if all services could be combined into two central points. These so-called 'Student Lounges' would provide:

- Meeting rooms for committees and boards that do not have their own office
- Room for activities of study and student organisations
- Location for the judicial help-desks of different associations
- Studio rooms where students can record podcasts or live streams
- A general place for socialising and coffee-appointments

The facilities above already exist but are scattered throughout the city. Combining them into two central locations - one close to the city centre and one near Zernike - would give active students and associations clear locations where they can carry out their daily activities.

Increasing Board Grants

Being part of the board of a student organisation often results in a study delay. The University therefore compensates board members by giving them several grant months. The value of a grant month has been set at €444,20 in 2015 and has not risen since. Over the same period, tuition fees have increased by nearly 10% [1], meaning that board members now receive a lower compensation vis-a-vis their tuition fees than they did six years ago. We believe that this is unfair. Since student board members *have* to be enrolled at the University, the compensation they receive for their work should be tied to the cost of tuition fees. Therefore, we propose a one-time increase in the value of a grant month from €444,20 to €500,00 to catch up with the increasing cost of studying and living in Groningen. From next year onwards, the value of a grant month should be tied to tuition fees: if tuition fees rise by 2% in a given year, the value of a grant month should also rise by 2%. This ensures that board members of student organisations are adequately compensated for their efforts and that fewer interested students will refrain from volunteering as board members because of financial constraints.

Certificate for Board Years

We believe that the University should give more recognition to students that voluntarily spend a year on the board of a student organisation. The certificates for board years that the University currently provides are limited: they only contain the name of the association and some general remarks about the value of student organisations to Groningen. We will push the University to provide a more detailed description tied to the specific function of a board member. This would make it easier for students to show future employers what skills they have acquired during their board year. This is especially important for international students: the idea of 'doing a board year' is rather unknown outside of the Netherlands, and many international students feel like the delay in their studies weighs heavier to potential employees than the experience they gain by doing a board year. If the University explicitly states the skills acquired during a board year in these official certificates, it becomes far more attractive for international students to volunteer for one.

Associations Events Platform

We are hopeful that all associations will be able to provide a wide range of exciting events from September onwards. That being said, it can be challenging to know exactly what is going on in the city. Many student organisations find it difficult to promote their public events beyond their regular members. Therefore, we are going to work on a public forum where all student organisations can share their public events. This way, students can see all events planned for the next few weeks simply by looking at a single webpage. Not only would this be a good way for boards to promote their events to a wider audience - it would also allow broadly interested students to search for and attend events that they normally would not have heard of. The platform will also have a dedicated section where student boards can post their vacancies. This would make it easier for associations to find new board members, while students would get a good overview of all the boards that they can apply for. We strive to set up this website either by ourselves or together with other interested parties. Once the

infrastructure is there, we will invite student organisations to share and promote their public events there.

National initiatives

Promoting student interests often transcends the University level. The SOG has long-standing connections with institutes at a national level, such as the *Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg* and the *Landelijke Kamer van Verenigingen*, both of which have close ties to the Ministry of Education. We will utilise this network to fight for student interests at a national level, along with our sister parties at other Dutch universities.

Removing the Loan System

The SOG believes that everyone should be able to get a higher education without taking on a large amount of debt. The promised investments in higher education that would come with the loan system have not materialised. At the same time, students are pressured to graduate as fast as possible to avoid amassing debt. This can make it difficult to join an association or to participate in other extracurricular activities. This is not right - students should have the possibility to explore their interests and develop themselves instead of having to rush through their studies. We thus want to use our national connections to lobby the government to get rid of the long-overdue loan system.

Adequate Compensation

During the last national elections, almost all political parties expressed their desire to replace the loan system with the 'base grant'. Although we are hopeful that this can be achieved soon, we do not want to leave behind students who *did* have to take on extra debt under the loan system. The current generation of students will graduate with significantly more debt than the students before and after them. This larger debt makes it harder to compete on the housing market and to set yourself up for the rest of your adult life. Therefore, we believe that students who started studying under the loan system should receive a fair compensation. A small check for future education or single payment of a thousand euros is not enough. Since the base grant gave every student an average of €200 a month [2], we believe that every student's debt should be reduced by €2000 for each year that he or she studied during the loan system. This is the only way to avoid a 'guinea-pig' generation that got disadvantaged by a failed government experiment.

Flexible Studying

We believe that it is crucial that students can gain experience by undertaking extracurricular activities alongside their studies. Doing a board year, being active in an association or doing an internship abroad can all provide you with valuable experience and competencies. In order to facilitate this, students need the freedom and flexibility to combine their degree programme with an active student life.

Lower Attendance Requirements

Attendance requirements vary significantly between faculties and courses. While some have no attendance requirements, others only allow you to miss a single seminar per block. We believe that the latter is problematic: such strict attendance requirements can interfere with your responsibilities outside of the classroom. If you happen to be ill during the first week of the block and have to miss a seminar because of this, you are heavily constrained in your scheduling for the rest of the block. We will urge the Board of the University to advise all Faculties and courses to allow students to miss a minimum of 2 seminars per block. Courses that work with practicums or lab sessions should provide one catch up session during exam weeks. These measures would give students the freedom to miss the occasional seminar without facing harsh consequences, thus resulting in more breathing room to plan their own lives.

More Regular Exam Schedule

Another quality-of-life improvement is better scheduling of exams. Too many students have exams on the weekend, late at night or very early in the morning. This is detrimental to one's focus and productivity. Exams are very important and should always be conducted at a time convenient to students so that they can perform to the best of their ability and truly show what they have learned during a semester. Therefore, we want to push the University to have all exams take place between 09:00 and 18:00 on weekdays. We believe that the required additional investments in rooms where exams can be conducted are worth it. These rooms could either be temporary facilities that are only rented during exam periods or more permanent locations that could be used as studying spots before the exam weeks take place.

Mental Health

The importance of mental health has been brought to the forefront by the pandemic. Since one out of three students have experienced depressive symptoms [3], the University needs to take the problem seriously. The social isolation resulting from the pandemic has led to a large increase in anxiety and loneliness among students who formerly did not suffer from these conditions. Since the University is the institution facilitating online education - which leads to isolation - it is only fair that they take the appropriate measures to address mental health concerns.

Support System

Although there currently are a number of student psychologists available, their capacity is limited, as is made evident by the long waiting lists. Students with mental struggles should be able to get help within the University on short notice, meaning that more student psychologists should be hired. The University could also establish an external infrastructure of psychologists and therapists by working together with other organisations. There are possibilities to get counselling outside of the RUG, yet the University does not always recommend these. Outside counselling would help students that need more than the five sessions provided by student psychologists.

Although the University is already providing some help for mental health problems, many students are simply unaware of these options. Shifting the focus to an increase in promotion of these services, for example during the introduction week for first-year students, would make it easier for interested students to make use of them.

Cooperation with Student Organisations

This renewed focus on promotion does not only apply to services provided by the University. Many student organisations are already taking great initiatives to promote the mental well-being of their members, for example by letting students that struggle with depression share their stories. Such initiatives help lift the taboo on discussing mental health issues. It would be to everyone's benefit if Faculties took an active role in promoting such events. Associations could also share them on the online platform that we are setting up.

The SOG is glad that the taboo on mental health has been partly lifted and that the University is taking concrete steps to tackle this issue. It is crucial that everyone has access to help when they are struggling mentally, and we thus want to work together closely with all other University Council parties to ensure that this remains a high priority of the RUG.

Consent and Sexual Assault

We strongly believe that every student in Groningen should feel safe and at home. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, especially for women. Recent studies have shown that the number of reports of sexual intimidation at Dutch Universities has doubled over the past two years [4]. The University should do everything it can to stop this worrying trend. This should start with an investigation into the scope of the problem at our University: we need to find out how big the problem is and what concrete measures the University can take to combat the problem and create a safe environment for everyone. Confidential counsellors at faculties and cooperation with large student organisations can play an important role in creating an environment where everyone feels safe.

Internationalisation

The University of Groningen has become more and more international recently, providing students with more than 30 different bachelors in English. Nearly a third of our students are internationals - a number that is expected to grow over the next couple of years. Internationalisation has tremendous benefits for our University and our student community: meeting people from all over the world provides you with fresh ideas and insights and makes you more tolerant of other ways of life. Having an open door for internationals allows one to dive into other cultures and perspectives, allowing oneself to grow and enrich themselves by learning from others. The University is an institution that prepares us intellectually for our future careers. Yet, social interaction - especially with people from diverse cultural backgrounds - help form character, which can be considered equally important. We want the University to do everything it can to make internationals feel at home in our city and to provide the infrastructure that sets them up for success!

Continuation of Housing Solution

Student housing has been an issue for years. Only two years ago, incoming students had to live in tents for months. If the University actively tries to attract students, it also has the responsibility to ensure that sufficient accommodation is available to them. We will push the University to work together with housing associations in order to construct new student housing. Until this has materialised the University must look into temporary solutions. One option is to make it cheaper to travel in the area surrounding Groningen. Whereas Dutch students already have access to a free public transport, such a system does not yet exist for internationals. The current SOG Faction is talking with the Board of the University to see whether this can be arranged. Free public transport would allow international students to find housing only a short distance from the city without incurring high costs, thus lowering the pressure on the Groninger housing market.

Structural Integration

Many functions within the University are currently unavailable to international students. We believe that this needs to change - international students should be able to apply for the same functions as Dutch students. This means that we need to change the infrastructure of the University. Although this will be a long and difficult process, small steps can be taken already. English translations of all important documents should be made available and all University positions should be open to non-Dutch speakers as well. We will also urge the Board to empower the language centre so that international students can follow Dutch language courses if they want to integrate further.

Translation of Documents

The absence of translated documents makes international students feel excluded from several governing bodies. We therefore urge the University to provide English translations for all documents relating to the University's policies and governance. This ensures that international students can also fully participate in the process.

University Functions

The University of Groningen offers many exciting functions and jobs to its students. Students are able to become involved in the governing of our faculties and the University. These functions, such as being part of a Faculty Council or a Programme Committee, provide you with valuable experience and help you build your network. Many of these functions, however, are only available to Dutch students. This needs to change: since nearly a third of our students are international, they should be able to fulfil any function within the University that is available to Dutch students. Our goal is to allow internationals the possibility of carrying out functions such as the CUOS board and the student assessor. The Board of the University should advise faculties with a large number of international students to do the same.

Dutch Courses

Learning the language of the country you are living in is a big part of integration. Every year, hundreds of international students recognise this by attempting to learn Dutch. The Dutch courses provided by the language centre, however, are hard to get in. One important reason for the unavailability of Dutch courses is that too many students sign up without actually attending the course. This leads to half-empty classrooms and wasted resources. To combat this we will advise the language centre to implement a system similar to what ACLO is already using. When signing up, students have to deposit a small amount of money. This money will be refunded once the student has completed the course without missing more than two classes. We believe that this will incentivise students to complete the courses they sign up for. This implementation alone would not be enough to satisfy the demand for Dutch courses. The growing number of international students at our University necessitates additional investments in the language centre. This would allow them to increase the number of rooms and teachers available. Such budget increases should not be limited to a short time frame, as has been done in the past. Long-term budget increases are costly but would allow the language centre to provide long-term planning and job security.

Centralised Buddy System

Moving to a different city as a new student can be challenging and stressful. Having a 'buddy' in the city on arrival can help to alleviate this stress by showing you around and informing you about cultural differences. Many faculties have already implemented such 'buddy systems' for their own programmes. While this is a laudable development, these programmes are study-specific and often distinguish between international and Dutch students. Currently, interaction between students from different faculties and programmes is rare. A centralised 'buddy system' would make for a more coherent and interconnected student population. Incoming students are invited to join a pool that spans across faculties and nationalities. When signing up, hobbies, interests, and the language preference of each student are collected. Students are then paired based on these inputs through an algorithm. Expertise on

the procedural details of the system can be collected from faculties that already have experience with such a system. We believe that such a centralised system would make new students feel more welcome and at ease when moving to Groningen.

Access to non-Western literature

When researching, many students rely on the sources provided by SmartCat or journals to which the University has access. These journals and articles are generally written from a Western perspective, with a majority of them originating from the United States or Europe. This is unfortunate because non-Western scholars make great contributions to many different disciplines. On top of that, they often approach historical and political issues from a different angle. We will urge the University to provide better access to non-Western academic sources. This would allow interested students to research topics from a different and more complete perspective.

Sustainability

The transition to a greener University calls for continuous improvement and evaluation. Over the past years, sustainability has been more at the forefront of the University's policies, and more sustainable measures have been implemented as a result. For instance, the Zernike Campus now partly fulfils its energy needs from solar panels [5]. In order to continue this trend, we aim for more structural inclusion of sustainability throughout all aspects of the University. As students are becoming more aware of the impact of climate change, it is all the more important for the University to act upon this.

Sustainable Investments

We believe that future investments largely determine the effectiveness of the University's sustainability goals. We therefore argue for more structural integration of sustainability into the finances and budget of the University. In this way, future sustainable policies will receive the financial means necessary to be effective in reducing the University's climate impact.

Sustainable Budget

Currently, the University's budget does not allocate the necessary funds to reach its sustainability goals. In order for the University to become carbon neutral, a larger part of the budget must be allocated to sustainable policies. Expenditures on sustainable projects need to be increased and made more transparent. By structurally including sustainability in the budget, we believe that we can hold the University's expenditure more accountable on a continuous basis.

Green Finances

The University has public and private investments in order to ensure financial stability. Although these investments' purpose is to guarantee the quality of education, they also fall within the social responsibility of the University to contribute to a more sustainable society. Therefore, the University must mainly invest in 'green' industries that have an actual climate-friendly effect. For instance, investments in renewable energy contribute to a cleaner environment.

Pension Funds

The Algemeen Burgerlijk Pensioenfonds (ABP), which is the pension fund of approximately 5500 staff members at the University, invests at least 10% in industries generating energy through the use of fossil fuels [6]. We believe that this is diametrically opposed to the sustainable goals set by the University to become carbon neutral. Additionally, research from the University itself has demonstrated that investments into fossil fuel industries are likely to yield a loss in returns due to devaluation in the long run [7]. We appreciate previous efforts from the University in pointing out the harm of investing in polluting industries, but a complete transition to sustainable alternatives continues to be put off [8]. We will therefore push the University to urge the ABP to cut ties with sectors linked to non-sustainable industries.

The Role of the Green Office

The Green Office is the main sustainability-focused organ of the University. In doing so, it can provide support and advice to students and staff about sustainability. We believe that the Green Office should be given a more important role in the upcoming years.

Budget

An increase in the budget is the first important step to expand the competences and the influence of the Green Office. We would like to see structural development in terms of personnel, expertise and student participation. This increase should include a full-time position for the formal mediation between the Green Office, the Board of the University and the University Council. There should be an expansion of the Student Team with a monetary reimbursement proportionate to their commitment. It should particularly focus on stimulating active students who are or would like to be involved in sustainable projects.

Co-decision

The Green Office is currently only able to present its proposals to the Board of the University, which can decide to approve or refuse them. We believe that the University Council should have the possibility to officially discuss and advise upon sustainable proposals, which, after approval, will have more weight for the Board. For this reason, it would be important to give the Green Office the possibility to submit its plans and proposals to both the Board and the Council. In this way, the implemented plans will enter into an enlarged discussion which will give them more visibility within the University and its students. This does not entail extra costs or work for the Green Office and gives the Council the ability to review and discuss green proposals in an official setting.

Green Advisor

Although the University can implement its sustainability policies in many ways, some of these policies necessitate a compromise between sustainability and other factors. In these circumstances, the Board can ask the Green Office for a 'Sustainable Advice' on a specific matter. Given the importance that the Green Office has for us, we want it to have the discretion to issue an official 'Sustainable Advice' on its initiative. For each matter, the Green Office can delegate the task to one of its members who will issue a 'draft sustainable advice' which should be approved by the Sustainability Sounding Board. This advice should analyse and assess only the measure's impact on sustainability without compromising the structure of the matter at hand. If a document has been analysed this way, the Green Office could request its 'Sustainable Advice' to be added to the document for visibility. It shall not be binding on the Board nor preventing the University to follow its normal procedure, but might be used in the University Council.

Travel Green Grant

The University attracts many students from all over the world due to its high quality of education. As a result, the University must recognise the increase in its total carbon footprint due to students travelling by plane. We believe that the impact on the environment must be reduced by limiting the number of short flights within Europe. Following the example of the University of Utrecht and the Uppsala University in Sweden, we propose a Green Travel Grant [9]. As part of the Erasmus+ programme, the University offers various exchange programmes with universities in Europe that are reachable by an alternative and more sustainable mode of transport. The Travel Green Grant facilitates this by providing financial compensation for students travelling by bus or train to their exchange destination. By using the University of Utrecht as an example, we propose to the University to start off with a grant of around €180.

Students of Tomorrow

The University plays an important role in educating future decision-makers. For this reason, it is important to spread knowledge about sustainability and encourage students to act more sustainably. We believe that academic education can play a vital role in finding solutions to future environmental challenges.

Campus Fryslân

Campus Fryslân currently offers one bachelor programme and a few master programmes in the field of sustainability. We value the multidisciplinary character of these programmes because they deal with sustainability from different perspectives and encourage critical thinking. These master programmes are, unfortunately, relatively unknown to many students in Groningen. We think this is a shame as Campus Fryslân offers a high quality of education and various possibilities within programmes to cooperate with institutions such as the Global Center on Adaptation. Therefore, we want to increase the visibility of these master programmes by arguing for a larger inclusion in the promotion of masters for students within relevant bachelor programmes. In doing so, students will become more aware of the possibility of following a sustainable master's degree at Campus Fryslân.

Innovative and Multidisciplinary Programmes

Sustainability is a complex concept and calls for a broad and multidisciplinary approach. In line with the master programmes offered at Campus Fryslân, we ask the University to set up more innovative and multidisciplinary study programmes that deal with sustainability from different perspectives. The development of such sustainable bachelors and minors enables students to learn and combine knowledge from different disciplines. Additionally, students are encouraged to think critically about solutions to future environmental challenges. In this way, we want to create a more direct link between relevant social concerns and academic theory.

Sustainability Course

We believe that knowledge about sustainability should also be available to students that do not wish to follow an entire sustainable bachelor or minor programme. Therefore, we propose the development of an extracurricular sustainability course that is available to all students next to their regular study programmes. The course deals with sustainability from multiple academic perspectives but also encourages students to relate it to their own specific bachelor degree. Interest in sustainability is growing, and knowledge about the topic must be available to everyone. For this reason, the University must encourage the knowledge process in relation to sustainability by establishing and offering courses.

Green Match

The SOG wants to highlight the numerous possibilities within the facilities of the University to become more sustainable. In doing so, we see the potential of students to contribute to a greener University. Therefore, we propose the development of more sustainable course projects and internships that enable students to take a thorough look at where the possibilities and challenges lie for the University's facilities to become more sustainable. As an initial set-up has already been introduced by the Green Office, we would like to further integrate this by setting up a 'green match'. Via an online platform, the facility services of the University are able to propose vacancies for course projects and internships, which range from sustainable catering at events to the use of more green energy. The possibility to obtain some extra credit for completing projects must be made available to encourage and award students who partake in them. In this way, students will be more integrated into the sustainability course of the University and get to combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

Transparency

This year, the SOG has expressed the importance of more transparency about the University's sustainable policies [10]. As a result, the discussion has been initiated, and more attention is given to this matter. If the University wants to make fundamental, sustainable advances, it needs to be transparent and open on how it plans to achieve this. We will continue this discussion next year as we believe that the University's sustainable policies should continuously be held accountable.

A Green Overview

The website of the University plays an important role in facilitating information and updating students. The Green Office has the task of providing information in relation to sustainability. However, it can be unclear where this information can be found - sometimes, it is missing from the website altogether. We aim for the University to provide a more comprehensive online overview of its sustainable policies and achievements. Through the University website, the Green Office should publish its documents, both official and unofficial, giving visibility to its proposals.

Visible Documents

All documentation that includes details on the energy use of faculty buildings must be easy to find on the University's website. We believe in the importance of openly accessible information. These documents can help identify a faculty's future challenges and sustainable opportunities. Therefore, we strive to have these documents available for educational purposes as well. In this way, students will have the opportunity to put theoretical knowledge into practice by advising on how the University can become more environmentally friendly.

Sustainable Food

The agriculture sector is responsible for nearly 25% of all greenhouse gas emissions, 80% of which comes from livestock production, including transportation and feeding. We ask the University to take this into account when deciding the menu offered in the cafeterias and canteens. The University should do this by concluding several contracts with different producers, giving priority to vegetarian suppliers. Furthermore, the University should guarantee accessible and reasonably priced vegetarian and vegan options. To reduce the emissions from production, transportation and conservation, the University should give priority to seasonal supplies of local products, organic when possible. We want to push for a smooth and measured transition to avoid high additional costs. This will have a positive impact on the environment in the long run.

Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major shift towards digital learning. Many students are unhappy with this change: they have a hard time focusing during online classes and they miss the physical interaction and discussion with their peers. This can result in poor academic performance and a general lack of motivation and enthusiasm to study. The University's educational infrastructure is already under tremendous pressure, a problem that will only increase in the coming years as a result of the high number of students coming to Groningen next year. The quality of your education is one of our top priorities, and we will thus urge the University to adopt any measures available to safeguard it.

Facilitating education

The pandemic forced the University to rapidly switch to online education. Although this was necessary at the time, it is now clear that digital learning has serious downsides compared to physical education. Students find it hard to focus on their laptops for hours on end, miss the physical interaction with their peers and are losing their motivation to study. We will therefore urge the University to do everything possible to facilitate physical education. Working groups, seminars, and practicals should be offered in person at the start of the next academic year. Although we will also push for physical lectures, we have already heard from faculties that they will struggle to provide this. We will nevertheless further look into all possible options to have physical lectures next year.

There are also no foolproof ways of online examination that assure the same quality as offline exams do. This could potentially undermine the quality of our diploma in the eyes of employers or those in charge of selection for master programmes. Therefore, the University should reinstate physical examination as soon as possible. Online alternatives should be available for those that feel unsafe until the pandemic has passed. Finally, we will urge the University to fully open up the University Library as soon as possible. Many students have trouble concentrating at home and rely on the library to get their hours of focused studying. We are confident that these changes can be made safely and responsibly, especially considering the reopening plan issued by our national government [11].

More Study Spots

Anyone who has visited the University Library during an exam period knows that the number of study spots is limited. During these times it becomes impossible to find a spot where you can sit and study for an exam. The expected large influx of students next year will only worsen this problem. We believe that the University has the responsibility to provide study spots to each student that wants one. The University can temporarily increase the number of study spots available by opening up seminar and lecture rooms during exam weeks. Additionally, we want the University to investigate renting part-time study halls or spots that would become available during exam periods. This would ensure that every student has a quiet place to study or work on assignments.

Student-Staff Ratio

Although the number of students at our University has been increasing steadily over the past few years, the number of staff members has not grown accordingly. Even as professors work overtime, the number of students crammed into a single lecture hall keeps growing. This trend is unsustainable and a direct cause of the decrease in the quality of education. We will therefore use our national networks to pressure the government to make a structural investment of €1.1 billion into higher education [12]. This investment would ensure that there are enough qualified teachers to educate every student at our University.

Student Representation

Many students finish their bachelor's without ever coming in contact with co-governance at the University. Being well-represented does not only mean having capable people on boards: it also means being informed about the structure of the University so that each student can make informed decisions. This entails knowing who represents you and where to go when you have feedback or suggestions. The problem is that many students are unaware of the governance and structure of the University because they are never exposed to such information in their first years. Therefore, the potential of co-governance and student representation could be enhanced if faculties included this in the information packages that students receive when they arrive at the University. Additionally, many first-year students in particular feel detached from the University because they did not have the opportunity to visit the University buildings this year. In order to make sure that first-year students have their voices heard and feel integrated into the University structure, their observations should be considered. This can be achieved through the creation of a first-year council. Such a council has already been successfully implemented in a number of faculties. Students can pool their ideas and suggestions here and are made aware of who to contact and who their representatives are. This body would provide an evaluation report after the first block and at the ending of the year. This report will focus on guidance, access to resources and facilities and contact with other students and staff. It is crucial to learn what problems first-year students are facing, especially because they are quitting their studies at higher rates than before [13].

Educational values

Ethics

We believe that the University has an important role in the individual and intellectual growth of its students. The University educates students to become future decision-makers but must do so in a responsible manner. Therefore, we want to stress the value of academic responsibility when it comes to education and doing research. We propose the inclusion of ethics in existing courses such as Academic Skills. At the moment, students mainly learn the skills necessary to conduct academic research, yet the role and place of academics in society could also be discussed. By virtue of offering an ethics course, academic research will be put in a social-cultural context. In this way, students will be more engaged in public debate, and academics will be more socially relevant.

Academic Freedom

Over the past few years, certain developments have put pressure on academic freedom within our University. The most prominent of these is the University's former cooperation with the Chinese Confucius Institute. Some Chinese students felt pressured by the Institute to refrain from conducting research critical of the Chinese government. We believe that situations like these are unacceptable: every student at our University should have the freedom to conduct research however they see fit. Critical voices should be embraced, not silenced. We promise to never compromise on academic freedom when discussing future partnerships or initiatives in the University Council.

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