

# PETITION: PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE STUDENT WELLBEING

*On the initiative of the Faculty Associations Assembly (FAA) and all study associations*

*With support of the full student section of the University Council (Calimero, SOG, DVS, DAG) and the Groninger Studenten Bond (GSb)*

## Motivation

Following the prolonged period of lockdown due to the government's measures, many students are facing increasing difficulties. Difficulties ranging from not studying properly due to a lack of working environment, increasing mental wellbeing issues due to feelings of isolation, and a lack of social stimulation. These difficulties are also enhanced by a lack of perspective for positive change, as illustrated by Tahrim Ramdjan in a recent NRC article (<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/02/24/studenten-slikken-de-zoethoudertjes-niet-meer-a4033151>). To mention a few numbers, 56.2% of young adults aged between 18-24 are reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression. 25% of young adults within the same age group have said that they either started or increased substance use during the pandemic. (Panchal et al., 2021) These issues are taking their toll on students, and as associations closely interlinked with the student body, we have noticed that the need has arisen to address these matters.

Study associations are at the forefront of providing social cohesion to all students at the University of Groningen. From the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak onwards, study associations went all out to connect students and stimulate a sense of belonging even in a limited physical environment and nowadays in a wholly digital environment. Until now, they were coming up with creative solutions to maintain social cohesion and working tightly together to reinforce the 'social safety net' for students has been our primary objective. However, we notice that more and more students are getting detached from the university and from us as associations to offer support, enlarging the sense of urgency of speaking out.

Currently, the necessity to reach out has reached an all-time high. We, as study associations, see this petition as a last resort to improve student wellbeing and tackle the aforementioned issues. Therefore, to combat these feelings and best cater to students' wishes, specific proposals have been formulated of which we reckon will improve the situation considerably.

Source: Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Cox, C. & Garfield, R. (2021) The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use. Retrieved on February 25, 2021, from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>. Kaiser Family Foundation.



## Proposals - needs of students

Below are the specific proposals summarised; further elaboration and context to the proposals are stated later on.

### Increase access to buildings and university grounds for students

Allow students to enter university buildings to facilitate the study process and improve mental wellbeing

1. Give faculty boards the responsibility to decide on capacity in their respective buildings
2. Facilitate responsible physical get-togethers for students in need of contact
3. Enlarge support for study associations to stimulate student social cohesion
4. UB with increased capacity
5. Expand the use of the pilot test street of COVID-19 tests to ensure safe interaction
  - i. Access to buildings for studying and hosting online events could be ensured to be safe when presenting a COVID-19 negative score (safety for personnel is guaranteed)
  - ii. The test capacity is far from being reached; more tests are able to be taken next to an examination
6. Reopen OB18 to facilitate safe interactions between students (easy to avoid UG staff in OB18)
7. Investigate the use of examination halls and lecture halls for safe study spots
8. Increase the use of outside stands to facilitate safe interaction (infection rate is lower outside)

## Elaboration on proposals

### Increase access to building for students

General:

To combat loneliness and facilitate the most vulnerable students, the university grounds have been open in an extremely limited form. Due to the sharp increase in students with severe mental health issues prevailing and hindering them, a need for further opening up of university buildings has been identified. In thousands of square meters of virtually unused space, which has been extensively prepared for safe use, a plethora of safe and comfortable environments are available. Since each faculty was individually responsible for the structuring and creating this environment, it would be prudent to place the responsibility of allowing students to enter the building on the faculties themselves. By leaving access to buildings at the discretion of individual faculty boards, a direct and more effective entrance policy can be warranted. Moreover, tests during the current lockdown by different universities in The Netherlands, for instance, at the VU Amsterdam, show that trusting students to take their responsibility in using



university facilities has not increased infections. Quite the opposite, students experience this approach to be effective.

Below, an elaboration per specific proposal is written to provide more context to the proposals and highlight the said proposal's importance.

- *Give faculty boards the responsibility to decide on capacity in their respective buildings*

Currently, the prohibition of access to university buildings has been a significant decision that separate faculty boards can not deviate from. As these faculty boards also consist of highly professional staff, providing them with a margin of freedom to alter the accessibility to their buildings would enable custom solutions for students in need.

Next to this, faculty boards are better aware of students' specific needs that are part of their faculty. Therefore, more fitting solutions can be sought within a reasonable framework. A one solution fits all approach adopting one strategy for all different faculties is bound to not work for all different types of students. For instance, FEB students might benefit from optional timeslots wherein they get the option to visit the library for study material. In contrast, FSE students might see value in being able to have a place to study for a few hours.

- *Facilitate responsible physical get-togethers for students in need of contact*

Students are in desperate need of physical contact with other students. Something made nearly impossible due to the current restrictions and the accessibility of the University buildings. Young adults in the province of Groningen now only give their life a 6.0 out of 10, compared to a 7,7 in the summer of 2020. This shows a drastic drop, mainly due to the decrease in physical contact with others. Furthermore, 75% of students experience loneliness due to the lack of physical contact. The University and study associations play a vital role in physical meetings between students. However, currently, there is no way in which students can safely meet each other. Physical contact is crucial for the mental and physical wellbeing of students. However, with the current policy, students are forced into loneliness or are resorted to meet in small unsafe student rooms for their mental wellbeing.

The university should start exploring opportunities to facilitate responsible physical get-togethers for students in need of contact. Many of the university buildings, such as the OB-18 and lecture halls, could be used for small and safe meetups for students in need of physical contact. Students are more than willing to oblige to measures to enable these meetups.



Furthermore, study association can also play a vital role in this, with their experience over the past year and willingness to organise physical interaction.

- *Enlarge support for study associations to stimulate student social cohesion*

As outlined in the motivation above, study associations have played an essential role in combating the document's issues. By being closely interlinked with the student population, the associations can play (and have been playing) a pivotal role. However, the denial of access to proper working spaces dramatically hinders the work's effectiveness that associations perform. Without access to proper facilities and working conditions, it has become increasingly challenging to provide for and cater to students. Exemplified by having unstable internet connections, excessive noise (e.g. construction activities), hindering meetings, and lack of proper digital hardware and desks, to name a few common issues.

By being granted access to proper facilities within the university, study associations will be much better able to host all types' online events. It is coordinating and managing a large-scale event such as a conference that requires proper internet connections and IT equipment, to which many board members do not have adequate access. By facilitating this, it would be ensured that this is not an issue and that the events will be of the same high quality as they would be in a normal situation.

- *UB with increased capacity*

One of the university's concrete steps to take is to open the university library with an increased capacity. At this time, vulnerable students can already reserve study space in the UB; however, only a small number of students are considered as vulnerable by the university. With an increased number of study spaces available for all students, you can give a much-needed change of surroundings. Through this, students can better plan and motivate themselves for their coursework and final assignments or upcoming exams.

Other universities in the Netherlands have already facilitated corona-proof study spaces at their university buildings, or if possible, at external locations. In Groningen, this is not the case, and we have received a large number of messages from students that desperately need a location that is not their room to be provided by the university to study at. This has become a dire need, as all students want to finish their studies, which has become even more problematic because of COVID-19. Opening the UB for all students who need it or creating study spaces at faculty buildings is the first step towards giving students the room to breathe and successfully come out of the Corona crisis.



- *Expand the use of the pilot test street of COVID-19 tests to ensure safe interaction*

Currently, the University of Groningen and Hanze Hogeschool are executing a pilot plan wherein students are tested for COVID-19 before a physical exam. Multiple of these pilot test streets are used for this purpose. As these test streets' capacity is far from its maximum, the opportunity arises to use this test street for other purposes. These other purposes could for instance be small-scale physical get-togethers or activities on university ground. For these get-togethers, it could be ascertained that every student participating has a negative COVID-19 test result, ensuring those who participate or guide the get-together. There should be investigated whether these test streets' spare capacity could then support student mental wellbeing by allowing physical interaction.

- *Investigate the use of examination halls and lecture halls for safe study spots*

One of our main goals with this petition is to raise awareness that more and more students require proper study spots. For many students, it is a challenge to study at home due to, for instance, technical difficulties or noises. Opening safe study spots will also be beneficial for our students' mental health, as described in the motivation above. That is why investigation in the use of examination halls and/or lecture halls for studying, in a safe way, is essential. During the last exam week (January 2021), it was shown that it is possible to use the examination halls for physically taking exams with students. We understand that this might have been an exception; however, in our opinion, it is vital to look into ways to use examination halls and maybe even lecture halls for safe study spots.

- *Reopen OB18 to facilitate safe interactions between students*

OB18 was opened as a spot to facilitate interactions between students through study associations. Right now, it is not allowed to organise any events due to regulations from the government. However, educational buildings like the UB are allowed to be open with limited capacity. While it is not possible to organise social get-togethers, it can already be beneficial for students to leave their homes and have a place to study together with others. In line with the government's plans to open libraries to facilitate safe interactions between young people ([source](#)), OB18 could serve as an addition to the UB, as long as actual events are not allowed. As OB18 has been equipped according to COVID-19 standards, with limited capacity and much space to walk between tables, not much staff is needed to operate this building, ensuring the safety of both staff and students. This way, students can meet other students in a safe and controlled environment.

- *Increase the use of outside stands to facilitate safe interaction*



As research has shown, the infection rate is significantly higher in enclosed areas (WHO, 2020). Partly for this reason, a number of tents were made available by the UG in September 2020 as a replacement for using UG buildings. This involved two tents on the harmony square which were designed to best accommodate students 'covid-proof'.

In September it was possible to use these tents to organise both formal and social events. The JFV made use of this option on several occasions. These events had groups of students present up to 50 students at a time. No contamination was reported after these events. Of course, we do not expect events in this form to be possible again right away. However, we do hope that lessons can be learned from this experience. This is teaching us that it is possible to use tables, chairs and walking lines to create a meeting place or study area in a safe manner in these tents.

Using tents is a viable option in terms of supervision, guidance, and ensuring the safety of personnel and students. Study associations' boards have, just as in the September situation, stood for this guarantee of safety and were present as supervisors. This can relieve supporting staff that does not feel comfortable or safe supervising students. However, with proper use of face masks and adhering to social distancing principles, we are confident that a safe environment can be maintained for supporting staff.

Source: WHO, (2020) *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): How does it spread?* Retrieved on February 25, 2021 from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted>

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