

Once education returns to campus

It looked briefly as if that day had finally come: there was a chance students would be allowed on campus for teaching one day a week from 1 April. Unfortunately that proved too optimistic and we now know higher education will remain in lockdown. But on-campus education will return one day. *Resource* investigated what that would look like, based on the easing of the restrictions that was recently announced – and then cancelled.



Text Luuk Zegers

The ‘possible easing’ that was announced for higher education from the end of March has been put on ice. The coronavirus figures are too worrying so universities must stay in lockdown, the caretaker government has decided. But even if the easing had gone ahead, many teachers would probably have finished period 5 online, says Dean of Education Arnold Bregt. ‘If it had been possible to ease the restrictions, we would have been in the middle of period 5. Those courses have already been completely adapted for teaching online. I think some teachers would have finished the period online. But there are teachers who say: if we are allowed, we’ll go back on campus with the students who want that. The main thing is that it’s up to the teacher. The teacher decides, in consultation with the timetable makers, what the best approach is under the circumstances.’

‘Wet’ and ‘dry’ classes

So what will the campus look like when restrictions are eventually eased? Gijs Elkhuisen (Forest & Nature Conservation programme director), a member of WUR’s Covid education taskforce: ‘Together with teachers, programme directors, timetable-makers and other staff involved in education, we are figuring out

the best way to plan WUR education in the light of the constantly changing coronavirus restrictions.’

‘If and when restrictions are eased, we will roughly be back to the situation we had before the lockdown,’ says Elkhuisen. ‘Since it started on 15 December, we have only been allowed to run the “wet” classes – the practicals in the lab – on campus. If restrictions are eased, “dry” class time such as lectures, tutorials and group work will be allowed on campus again. Given our campus capacity in Covid times, that will mean we can teach about 40 per cent of the “dry” classes on campus. With the “wet” class time we are at roughly 30 per cent now. Incidentally, students will not have the right to one day a week of on-campus education, but there will be a lot more scope than there is now.’

Excursions and field trips have come to a standstill during the lockdown too. After all, no more than two people are allowed to get together out of doors. Elkhuisen: ‘If teachers want to do something of that nature, at present it has to be at walking or cycling distance from Wageningen with a maximum of two people in the field. So real excursions are not possible, but you



Empty for now: hopefully we'll soon be able to meet up and have lunch together in Orion. Photo Guy Ackermans

see that teachers have found creative ways of offering practical experience using other instruments like the PEEK app (a Wageningen interactive education app for fieldwork, ed.).'

Since period 5, which started on 15 March, it has been possible again to take students by bus – sitting one and a half metres apart – to a location for a field trip done in pairs. Elkhuizen: 'If restrictions are eased, we want to see whether we can make use of rapid tests to do real group excursions again. We are also looking at whether we can do field practicals over several days again in period 6 (from 10 May, ed.). That would take place in the fresh air at a campsite, in one-person tents and with daily rapid tests. We are discussing this with the ministry at the moment.'

No guarantee

Why doesn't WUR aim for a campus education guarantee for all students once restrictions are eased?

'Our last campus activity was Sinterklaas'

Education dean Bregt: 'We tried that in the first period. Halfway through that period, I got a phone call from a full professor who was completely stressed out and said: "Arnold, we are all keeling over." That was a wake-up call for me. Then we made a few changes. We stayed firm on the learning goals at the programme level but became more flexible on learning goals at the course level, and teachers are now mandated to organize courses as they see fit. We stopped micromanaging as much. That is necessary, because the teachers are under tremendous pressure.'

To ensure the situation stays workable for teachers, they will decide whether to switch to on-campus education if and when the current restrictions are eased. But, says Elkhuizen, 'it is difficult for us to know how best to communicate that to students and teachers. The media paints a picture of all students soon being

'I'm concerned: the more people, the less distancing'

back on campus for a day a week. But it simply won't work like that here. If you are taking two courses in period 6 that the teachers have decided to teach online, then the courses will stay online. That will create differences between students.'

Bregt is not too worried about that. 'Our teachers are very student-minded, so if it's at all possible, they will make use of the campus hours they get. And also: there are already differences between students, because students with "wet practicals" are getting on-campus teaching during the lockdown, while the rest don't. Once restrictions are relaxed, the differences will actually decrease.'

Study associations

Once restrictions are eventually eased, the study associations will be allowed to hire rooms again for activities, says Elkhuizen of the Covid taskforce. 'As long as you meet certain criteria, of course.' That would be nice, says Shun Hei (Nathan) Lee (19), a board member of study association Aktief Slip. 'Our last activity on campus was Sinterklaas on 4 December. During the lockdown, we have organized online activities, like pub quizzes, discussions and an event where students learn to make their own eco-friendly deodorant. If the restrictions relax a bit, it will give us the option of running activities on campus again.'

Lee hopes the national measures will soon be relaxed further too. 'Normally, Aktief Slip organizes a weekend for the new first-year students at a campsite outside Wageningen. We have postponed that weekend time and again, but I hope we can organize it in May or June, depending on the corona restrictions.'

In the library, any possible easing of restrictions won't make much difference, says Marens van Dalen, who works in the front office of the Forum Library. 'There are 216 workstations in the Forum Library. That number won't change after restrictions are eased: the one-and-a-half-metre rule will still apply. So more on-campus education doesn't have direct consequences for us. Perhaps more students will come in to borrow books if they are on campus more often.'

'I notice that some students find it hard to distance,'

says Van Dalen. 'If they go downstairs soon after each other for a coffee break, for instance. They are all good about wearing their face masks and hand-sanitizing – that goes well. But if any easing of restrictions makes it busier in the Forum, I am concerned. The more people, the less distancing.'

At last

For first-year BSc student Laura Sólveig Lefort Scheefer (21) it would not be a bad thing to have a few more classes on campus – to put it mildly. 'I arrived in Wageningen last August. We are now in period 5 and I haven't attended a single lecture on campus. There was some lab work and group work on campus until the end of period 3, around the end of last year. So it feels like I haven't been on campus for ages.'

'The teachers are obviously trying their best, but you can learn more on campus,' says Scheefer. 'Because of the discussions in class, the group work and just from chatting with your peers. Of course, we are also missing the practicals and excursions. All those activities and study methods that are usually employed to help you fully grasp the course content are cancelled. So it's a lot harder to really understand it all.'

'It can be incredibly difficult to concentrate in one room all day, so I try to study with a friend or book a place on campus if possible. I think I can speak for everyone when I say that relaxing the restrictions would be better, for our studies and in general. It would be nice to get a bit of freedom back. Experiencing student life like it was last August would be great: some things on campus, some online. It was a good mix. Now, every day is just the same.' ■

