

‘Well, if that’s not hopeful...’

Although he has lost sleep over signals from the WUR community about things like work pressure and student wellbeing, Executive Board member Arthur Mol does see hopeful developments. ‘I’ve got a list here of universities in Europe that want to learn from us.’

In the past year and a half, he has often thought about how teachers and students must feel. They repeatedly had to adjust to new measures and be flexible. ‘They kept on recharging. Luckily, our personal approach to education was not at risk. Teachers kept in contact with students, whenever possible on campus. There is a tremendous built-in drive. The Executive Board doesn’t respond to every new government measure instantly. We try to take a long-term view – that creates more peace of mind. And we set a limited number of rules. We didn’t make campus-based teaching compulsory, for instance – that decision is up to the teachers, and we can do that here in Wageningen. It makes us sad when we hear about students who are at the end of their tether. This is their time: we want to keep normal student life going for them as much as possible.’

‘We want more young researchers who can be deployed flexibly’

When Covid-19 hit and working and studying from home became the norm, some teachers were also faced with IT projects, says Mol. ‘We decided to go easy on them for the time being and not introduce any more major change projects. And we have increased the teaching capacity by a lot, while student numbers have not increased. Hopefully that will give staff some breathing space, too.’

Research

Mol hopes that researchers will gain some breathing space too. ‘I do expect an increase in research questions on climate, spatial planning and nitrogen, which are our areas of expertise. But there is a better balance now between the number of staff and the number of

research questions. And we are working on expertise pools – like a nitrogen group, for example. We also want more young researchers who can be flexibly deployed in the organization, with a traineeship in several institutes at the same time.’

University

Mol: ‘We are joining forces with others including the employers’ federation VNO-NCW and the universities to get the government to invest more. We haven’t gathered much information from the coalition formation process, but I do think both employers and the government have realized the need to invest in research and development if the Netherlands wants to stay at the top. Because the problem lies with research: academics have to spend too much time on education, and research gets squeezed out. That needs to be more balanced.’

Proud

‘If you look at education,’ Mol goes on, ‘the various research rankings, sustainability and the SDGs, entrepreneurship, and transparency, WUR is doing well on all these fronts. We are at the forefront with open science. And these are no mean achievements. I hope people are proud of them and think: this is a difficult time, and it’s hard to stay motivated, but just look at how people see and talk about Wageningen. I have a list here on my desk of universities in Europe that are eager to learn from us. Well, if that’s not hopeful...’^{WA}



Arthur Mol
Executive Board
member