

Dreaming of classes on campus

Teachers are coping well online, but they don't really like it, as you can read on page 12. What about students? How has the coronavirus crisis affected their university experience? 'It's hard to stay motivated without the social interaction you get on campus.'

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In the survey among teachers done by Tim Stevens of Education and Learning Sciences (see pp 12-15), teachers say students are less involved and motivated in online education than they are on campus. And yet an enquiry at Education & Student Affairs reveals that students' academic results and pass rates per course are hardly any different to normal. So it seems that not many students will be held up and graduate later than planned.

Stevens' research also looked at course evaluations, in which students give feedback on the course they have taken. In this fifth period, students were on average just as satisfied with their courses as last year in the same period: they gave their course 3.8 on a scale of 1 to 5 this year as opposed to 3.7 last year. It is hard to compare the two years, however, as each student only evaluates the course once, and judges it in the specific context of that year.

CONFUSION AND STRESS

A recent survey focusing on the wellbeing of the Wageningen student population (with 1484 respondents, more than 11 per cent of the students) provides further detail about WUR students' experience of university studies. The figures here are less rosy: 33.8 per cent of the students indicate that the quality of the education went down with the transition to online education; 39 per cent are worried they will not complete the academic year successfully because of the coronavirus crisis; 62.8 per cent mention being less clear about what was expected of them during the courses they took.

The figures are based on period 5, when the transition to fully online education had to be made at extremely short

notice. Health & Society teacher and researcher Sabina Super conducted the survey. ‘The results show that a group of students are struggling with the situation,’ says Super. Which is hardly surprising. ‘There was confusion among teachers about what the implications of the coronavirus measures would be for excursions and practicals. If teachers don’t know, of course students don’t know either.’

The university’s coronavirus measures and the communication about them meet with approval, showed the survey: 79.1 per cent of students are happy with the protective measures. They were positive about the teachers too: 71 per cent of the students felt the teachers had created a safe learning environment for asking questions. But 50 per cent of the students still experienced considerable stress as a result of the change in teaching methods.

MIXED FEELINGS

Respondents to the survey were asked how often they experienced certain emotions. They quantified this on a scale of 1 (hardly ever) to 4 (nearly all the time). ‘Happy’ was the commonest emotion (2.55), closely followed by ‘missing company’ (2.53) and ‘couldn’t get going’ (2.46). ‘Enjoying life’ (2.44) scored highly too, as did ‘frustrated’. ‘Altogether the impression you get is that Wageningen students sometimes get frustrated by the situation, the

‘Some students are struggling with the situation’

lack of clarity and the stress,’ explains Super. ‘On the other hand, students seem to realize how lucky we are in the Netherlands, and they experience many moments of happiness. Those feelings are not necessarily mutually exclusive.’

HOME-BASED PRACTICALS

In a survey on *Resource*’s social media too, ‘missing company’ and ‘couldn’t get going’ came up a lot as negative consequences of online education. ‘It is hard to stay motivated without all the interaction on campus,’ writes MSc student of Sustainable Food Production Monica van Leeuwen. ‘I miss the interaction with teachers and fellow students, and I had been looking forward to the excursions,’ says MSc student of Biology Emma Labohm. Other students also said they missed the fieldwork and practicals. In some cases, with a bit of creativity, practicals and experiments can be done at home too. Student of Plant Sciences Daphne Ruiters replicated a Wadden Sea experiment using her parents’ wine cooler and some algae she ordered online (see page 31). But she says she wants to repeat the experiment later ‘under better conditions’ and that ‘all the students were disappointed that the fieldwork was cancelled.’

Some students can name advantages of studying at home, though. BSc student of Animal Sciences Annebelle Jonker: ‘You can pause previously recorded lectures to take notes.’ MSc Student of Plant Sciences Aarzo Kohra: ‘You learn to collaborate online and use online meeting apps, and I can type a lot faster now.’

But Kohra would still prefer to get back to campus as soon as possible. ‘The teachers are doing a great job and online education was the only option. But the best education simply is offline. There are so many things you can do offline that you can’t do online. I can’t wait to be back

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on campus.’ Super: ‘Students are full of praise for the teachers and their approachability. But there is more to student life than reading, attending lectures and sitting exams. A big element is social life: making friends, getting together, social cohesion. So from September, we want as many students as possible on campus, sticking to the guidelines laid down by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM).’

There was good news for all teachers and students who are longing to get back to campus at the government’s coronavirus press conference on Wednesday 24 June: from September, students are allowed to take public transport during the rush hour as well as during off-peak hours. That means classes can be scheduled for before 10:00 and after 15:00. 

If you want to know more about the student survey, you can read the website version of this article on www.resource.wur.nl.

