

'Students and teachers must get out of the trenches and join forces'

RESITS UP FOR DISCUSSION

WUR has the most generous resit policy of all the Dutch universities. This seems noble, but it may come at the expense of educational quality, lecturers and students. After years of dissatisfaction it is time for action, think teachers in particular.

It has been a thorn in the flesh of many lecturers for years: rushing back to Wageningen in the middle of the summer holidays to run and grade resit exams. To make matters worse, some of the students who registered don't show up and many of those who do are poorly prepared.

But there are other sore points too, such as the possibility for students to resit as many times as they like, the fact that students are allowed to start a second course on a subject before they have passed the introductory course, and the fact that it does not matter how badly they failed to be allowed to resit. (At Utrecht University, for example, you have to get at least a four to be allowed a second chance. If you get a lower grade than that, you have to retake the course.)

Stress

Teachers and students agree that Wageningen's resit policy is flexible, says policy officer and member of the resit working group Jetske ten Caat. 'On the whole, students see this as a positive thing: they feel they are allowed to make mistakes, which reduces stress. But teachers tend to see it mainly as negative: setting and grading new exams increases their workload. Their frustration is

increased by the fact that some students do not prepare adequately, do not show up or register ten times for a resit.' The changes being proposed now (bringing forward the summer resits and limiting the number of resits, see page 4) are small steps in a complicated dossier, she says. 'We've been discussing this for many years, but it is a sensitive issue because the wishes and interests of students and lecturers are opposed to each other. That is why the situation has stayed more or less the same for a long time.'

Lecturers Julia Diederren (Food Chemistry) and Jenneke Heising (Food Quality and Design) had had enough after years of fruitless discussion. They wrote a call to action in which they state that the current resit policy adds significantly to teachers' already heavy workload and that it is

'WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS THERE IS NO INCENTIVE TO PASS A COURSE IN ONE GO'



Text Luuk Zegers

On 29 June, the Student Staff Council will discuss a proposed decision by the Executive Board (1) to bring the summer resits forward from August to July and (2) to limit the number of resits to three per (resit) period (see also page 4). Keep an eye on resource-online.nl for the latest developments.

unacceptable that nothing is being done about it. The aim of their appeal is to spur people in the decision-making process on to show the 'courage and determination' needed to change the policy. Heising: 'The resit policy is often presented as something in which students and lecturers are opposed to each other. And yet nobody really wants those resits: students would rather pass a course first time.' According to Heising, the current policy is not good for anyone. 'It encourages students to procrastinate. And by resitting later, the testing becomes disconnected from the teaching, as if it's only about the exam.' This jeopardizes the quality of the education as well, she adds. 'Teachers

want to use interactive methods, but if some of the students do not participate actively during the course because they can resit anyway, that affects the quality. Half-full lecture halls are not very motivating. And who suffers as a result? The students who do want to participate. What is more, with endless resits, there is a bigger chance of a student passing the course without really having an adequate knowledge about it.'

Out of the trenches

The system has to change, of that Heising is convinced. 'Students want a good education and a highly valued degree. Teachers want to provide that. And we want to guarantee the quality of education. In short: we all have the same goal, so we must get out of the trenches and join forces to figure out how we can best achieve it.'

MSc student of Food Safety Menno Kasteleijn is in the resit working group

too. He does not entirely agree that students do not experience any pressure. 'At present it may seem as though students like it this way, but they certainly do feel pressure to pass exams, if only financially. They also don't want to fall behind their fellow students.' According to Kasteleijn, the value of the degree is not at risk. 'If the exam system is solid and you pass, you show that you have mastered the subject matter. Even if it's your tenth resit, you prove your competence.'

But Kasteleijn does agree with Heising and Diederens's call for a broadening of the discussion. 'At present, discussion is too often about the number of resits, while everyone stands to gain from keeping the number of resits as low as possible.' He himself struggled with the Advanced Statistics course. 'After I failed for the second time, the teacher emailed me: 'Hey, it's not going so well. You know you can always come by and spend

an hour preparing together.' I passed the next time round. Giving a student a helping hand like that means extra work for teacher beforehand, but saves them work later when they are grading the exam. So that's another way of going about it.'

This broader discussion is happening, Ten Caat tells us. 'We are working on a new approach to examinations, in which we look at testing within WUR from a broad perspective. Jenneke Heising is helping think it through as well. There are many ways to deal with fails and resits, for example that students can graduate with a fail for one course as long as they compensate for it with high grades for other courses. If you get a five for one subject and eights for all the rest, that really doesn't make you less capable.' ■



What do you think of Wageningen's resit policies? Have your say at www.resource-online.nl



The way students in Wageningen are allowed to resit as many times as they want creates extra work pressure for teachers. 'But it also has a negative effect on students!' • Illustration Valerie Geelen