



Summary April 3rd 2023

University Forum

Student Wellbeing in Education

Student Wellbeing in Education

On Monday afternoon, April 3rd 2023, University Forum members and guests engaged in a digital conversation about Student Wellbeing in Education. After a plenary introduction to the topic by guest speakers, attendees split into groups to discuss the four questions and statements below. The outcomes of those discussions are summarized in this report.

Questions and State- ments

Does investing in student wellbeing have a positive impact on education?

Statement: student wellbeing should be a part of education in our university

1

Every program and every faculty has different finances and opportunities.

Should student wellbeing be coordinated on a central level or on a decentral level to fit students their specific needs?

2

What do we need as students, teachers and staff to take steps towards a coordinated approach for student wellbeing?

3

Who is responsible for student wellbeing in our university?

Statement: The UvA needs a central vision on the importance of student wellbeing and its place in education.

4

Guest Speakers

To introduce the attendees to the topic, two (guest) speakers spoke at the beginning of the meeting: Tessa Trapp & Joyce Helsloot.

Tessa Trapp

Tessa is a third-year PPLE student, chairperson of the Central Student Council and fileholder of mental health and student wellbeing.

Tessa has been working for two years to increase awareness among students that there are various mental health services at UvA. During the COVID-19 pandemic more attention was paid to mental health among students, it is important to maintain this attention.

The Trimbos Institute, together with the RIVM, published a report on student mental health in 2021. This report stated that 51% of students experience mental health problems, within that group 12% experience serious complaints. The Trimbos Institute cited social support, loneliness, stress and performance pressure as causes of mental health problems. Tessa and the Central Student Council identify a number of causes in addition to these, such as the fact that starting college is a life-changing experience for many students. This is especially true for international students or Dutch students who are from another city. These groups lose their established network of friends and family and have to get used to a new system. Another cause is that university can be a vulnerable environment in terms of social safety for many students. One can think of bullying, sexual violence and power imbalances. Finally, there are structural factors such as a busy yearly schedule with exams taking place every 4 or 8 weeks, the abolition of the basisbeurs, higher costs of studying and living in general which means students have to work more, and high pressure from professional life and master programs for students to have relevant work and/or internship experience in addition to having to graduate within three years.

Thus, the Central Student Council believes that the university has a responsibility in addressing the root causes of decreased student wellbeing among students because many of the problems are linked to the university and its environment itself, in addition to the fact that overall good mental health is crucial to student success and satisfaction.

Joyce Helsloot

Joyce Helsloot is student advisor in the Communication Science program and is also coordinator of the course Academic Skills Tutoring (hereafter: AST).

Communication Science has embedded the course AST in their curriculum. In this course students are paired with a tutor in working groups and once a month they have a meeting. AST is a mandatory subject during the first and the beginning of the second year of studies, where students earn 2 ECTS. When students begin AST, they are given an intake form to make an inventory of their physical and psychological condition and whether there are any personal circumstances that require additional guidance. In order to guide students, conversations with a tutor are offered in this process, so that the program can respond to the student their individual situation earlier. Within AST, students are given information about the UvA, amongst other things, in order to familiarize them with the system and make them aware of the range of student wellbeing facilities available within the UvA. Attention is also paid to expectations, planning, study culture, and career orientation during and after study. Students attend master classes on student wellbeing with topics such as time management and stress reduction. Students reflect on these master classes through assignments and working groups.

A new format for AST is currently being developed in which students can choose their own topics such as perfectionism or study skills, on which workshops are offered by student deans and student psychologists. Along with this, a diversity working group is being formed in the first year of studies. Discussions are held with students about diversity, inclusion and interculturalism, to discuss, amongst other things, how to work well together and how to learn to listen well to each other and stand up for yourself despite any differences among them.

Does investing in student wellbeing have a positive impact on education? Statement: student wellbeing should be a part of education in our university

This group agreed that investing in student wellbeing has a positive impact on education. However, opinions were divided as to whether student wellbeing should be a part of education.

Proponents argued that teachers could pay attention to it within existing working groups in order to create awareness about this topic among students and teachers. This seemed preferable to setting up a separate module that not every program has the resources for. Opponents argued that mental health is a task of health care rather than the university.

Regardless of the fact that students themselves are responsible for their wellbeing, this group does see some areas for improvement, such as the provision of information and communication within the university about already existing student wellbeing provisions. After all, the university does have a duty to be mindful and considerate of student wellbeing. The group also pointed to the fact that it is important to look at the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which is about improving and ensuring equal opportunities in education and a more inclusive education. This convention actually states that all students, including those with mental or physical disabilities, should be able to receive an education.

Summarizing, the group agreed that the current offer of guidance at the UvA in the form of mentors, student advisors, student deans, and student psychologists seems adequate, but work could be done on the provision of information and communication about it.

Every program and every faculty has different finances and opportunities.

Should student wellbeing be coordinated on a central level or on a decentral level to fit students their specific needs?

This group believes that student wellbeing should be coordinated both centrally and decentrally. At the central level, expertise on student wellbeing should be brought in and care should be taken to ensure that knowledge about it is equal between faculties. In this regard, it would help if a central vision or mission is set out, which can then be further filled in at the decentralized level. At the decentralized level, faculties can personalize this vision or mission.

It is important that enough attention be paid to student wellbeing at the faculty and even program level. A faculty or program is the most accessible and approachable to a student, so they both play a big role in identifying where student wellbeing needs are in a timely manner. According to this group, it would be a good idea if student wellbeing is embedded in the study culture at each faculty, rather than a single-minded focus on academic performance. It would help to involve already existing student communities in this process. It is important that faculties have the resources to offer appropriate student wellbeing or to make students sufficiently aware of current offerings, again this is where the central level comes in to ensure that faculties do not differ too much in this.

Summarizing, this group believes that expertise should be brought in at the central level and a central vision or mission should be set out that is then worked out and filled in at faculty and program level. It is a good idea to involve existing student communities such as student associations in order to embed student wellbeing in the study culture.

What do we need as students, teachers and staff to take steps towards a coordinated approach for student wellbeing?

This group too feels that a UvA-wide vision or strategy is needed in the area of student wellbeing. By setting clear goals in a central vision, a coordinated approach can be developed after that. For teachers and staff, such a vision could help with determining what their role is in guiding students and their wellbeing.

Communication Science's course AST is a good example of offering student wellbeing close to the student by integrating it into a program's teaching. This group is in favor of raising awareness of student wellbeing in this way, and emphasizes that resilience, prevention, expectation management and normalizing the presence of some stress must be properly addressed. It would be a good idea to discuss prerequisites for studying with students, such as the fact that you need a lot of time per week to study.

It is important to provide a safe climate and some social cohesion so that students can discuss it if they experience mental health issues. The UvA already has a wide range of training and facilities such as the Online Study Space that students can use. So it seems important to start the conversation about communication about these offerings, and to look very specifically at what is still needed in terms of additional services in the areas of social cohesion and prevention. This group also found it a good idea to involve existing student communities in this process. In addition, there should be a safety net or system for referring students with more extreme problems to the right help.

Summarizing, this group believes it is important to offer low threshold student wellbeing support, this includes offering or communicating to students as much as possible at the program level. In addition, offering training at the central level is great for students who want to work on their wellbeing or skills with just a little more privacy.

Who is responsible for student wellbeing in our university?

Statement: The UvA needs a central vision on the importance of student wellbeing and its place in edu-

This group believes there is a shared responsibility for student wellbeing, but that initiative must be taken at the central level. A central vision for student wellbeing can help teachers and staff determine what is still missing or already working well and their role in their students' wellbeing. In doing so, it remains the students' responsibility to stay well informed and to know when they need help.

The university at a central level should look into what is needed to address the root causes of reduced student wellbeing. In doing so, the fact that studying is more expensive and busier for many students than it was years ago should be taken into account. A central framework or vision should be created for student support, student provisions and communicating the range of provisions to students. At the decentralized level, this framework should then be adapted to the individual needs of students, consistent with their faculty or program. In doing so, efforts must also be made at the decentralized level to communicate existing student wellbeing facilities to students. There is a responsibility here for the university to give extra attention to certain groups known to need more help with building a safety net and getting used to studying. This applies, for example, to international students.

More attention could also be paid to the positive side of student wellbeing, for example, by making students more aware of courses they can take at CREA or other social activities.

Summarizing, this group feels that a central vision of student wellbeing is needed that can be further developed decentrally. This should include looking at the root causes of reduced student wellbeing to frame this vision.



Questions? Please contact the official secretary Zazie van Dorp.
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