



Summary April 30 2021 @Zoom

University Forum

Back to Normal?

Back to Normal?

Now that more and more people have been vaccinated, we can start thinking carefully about the future. Do we want to get back to how it was as soon as possible, or do we want to do certain things differently from now on? And what about the impact of a year and a half of corona education and research? We can hardly pretend that nothing happened from September onwards. These are important questions to keep in discussion as an academic community, for which the University Forum provides a platform. This report sets out the findings from the University Forum meeting on this theme.

The theme was introduced by Karen Maex, Rector Magnificus, and Nina Hol, chair of the Central Student Council.

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Guest Speakers

Karen Maex

Karen Maex is Rector Magnificus of the UvA and introduced the theme of the session.

We would prefer to return to normal as soon as possible, but there is still a lot of uncertainty. We cannot just pick up our old tasks, there is still a lot to fix. There are academic and social backlogs for both students and staff. The government now has extra money available to work on these backlogs. Plans are now being made for spending this, among other things on more teachers, student assistants, professionalization and personal assistance. While we are working hard to facilitate a return to normal, we are also looking forward optimistically. There are things you can do online that cannot be done in physical education. We have been and will engage in extensive discussions with the UvA community about digitalization after corona.

Nina Hol

Nina Hol is a student of Law and chair of the Central Student Council of the UvA.

We are dealing with a major challenge. Today's freshmen have almost never had on-site education, so they have not had the chance to build a life in Amsterdam at all. This is also the case to a large extent for the second year students. They are in danger of losing their student experience. What can we do to still offer them that? We must also conclude that digitalization works out enormously differently in different courses. For large-scale programs, digitalization can offer a way out as a replacement for mass lectures, something that is not the case with smaller programs. As the UvA, we can therefore offer guidance, but ultimately there must be room for departments to choose their own path.



Are there any backlogs in teaching and education that we need to address from September onwards?

We cannot pretend that nothing happened when we go back to normal in September. The corona crisis has caused damage in the form of backlogs in various areas. First of all in the field of academic development. The problem may be greatest for students of studies with a large practical component such as the natural sciences and especially medicine and dentistry. The disappearance of the opportunity to be taught in the lab or cutting room has meant that these students have been able to gain far less practical experience than required. In many of our programs, it is customary for the thesis to partly consist of empirical research, something that often proved impossible due to the absence of the lab, but also due to obstacles to research in the field. It was also found that in many places requirements have been lowered so that students do not suffer study delay due to corona. We foresee problems if, from next year, these students will again have to deal with the old requirements in the master, for which they may not have been sufficiently prepared, especially when there are also courses from the bachelor that have to be caught up.

Developing communication skills is also part of academic education. Although break-out rooms have been used effectively in many places, there remains a concern that some of the students are lagging behind in this area. Consider offering them additional training / workshops after the summer. Ultimately, it is very difficult to determine the extent of someone's backlog, because of the enormous variation in study methods and the personal study environment. We will only really notice these backlogs from next year. In particular, writing theses turned out to be extra difficult in corona time, due to the lack of a pleasant study environment, but also because digitization raised the threshold to ask for advice. Teachers, on the other hand, experienced an overload of emails and zoom invitations. Here and there we experimented with possible solutions, such as starting the

day together (digitally). This turned out to work well. In addition to lagging behind in the academic development of students, there are also problems of career interruption among young academics. They are already in a vulnerable position and a high degree of competition, as a result of which the sudden limitation in possibilities was quite a challenge. Older colleagues helped out where possible, but as a result were also able to do less research themselves than desired.

There are also backlogs in the field of well-being, for both employees and students. The theme of “well-being” has become much more a topic of discussion because of corona, something that we must hold on to. It is problematic for the well-being of students that in the past year they hardly had the opportunity to make new friendships and build a student life. We must lend them a helping hand from September to catch up. This can be done, for example, by also offering the introduction week to older students (as suggested by Nina Hol), but also on a smaller scale by paying extra attention to getting to know each other before the courses begin. A final suggestion in this area is to investigate whether digitization can be used to transfer the benefits of study places as we know them to the student at home, for example by offering a freely

- ▶ **The backlog is greatest among students of studies with a large practical component, which will have to be compensated for.**
- ▶ **Offer workshops to improve students' communication skills.**
- ▶ **Students who have been admitted to a master's degree due to corona without having completed the bachelor's degree may require additional support.**
- ▶ **Investigate how starting academic staff can be supported in catching up on research backlogs.**
- ▶ **Pay extra attention to bonding at the start of the new academic year, for example by also offering the introduction to senior students.**

Which aspects of corona education and research do we want to keep after the pandemic?

In general, we want to get back to how it was as soon as possible, but with a few improvements here and there. The forced transformation of education and research in corona time has also had several positive sides that we can draw on in the future. In the larger studies, for example, it was appreciated that massive lectures were offered digitally, since the lectures were previously not very interactive because of their size. There may be much to be gained by replacing these lectures with knowledge clips and investing the time freed up in more small-scale education. Knowledge clips differ from recorded lectures in that the teacher has control over how the clips will appear, making this an attractive alternative for teachers who are not fans of having their lectures recorded and published immediately. In order to really get the clips and smaller-scale education off the ground, extra money is needed, for example from the extra resources made available by the government. Large-scale meetings can continue to take place occasionally when, for example, a special speaker is a guest.

Digitalization also offered opportunities for research-intensive education in the past year, because it became easier to invite (international) guests to briefly tell students about their research. This also applies to scientific conferences in general, as international guests no longer have to travel to attend. In order to maintain the social aspect, a hybrid approach is also a good idea, so that those who want to can discuss it afterwards on site with a drink. Digital contact with students also turned out to be beneficial for study advisers. The threshold for making an appointment is lower because of the lack of travel time and because the student calls from home, the conversation sometimes feels more personal. Of course it must remain possible to meet physically, but the digital appointment appears to be a good addition.

- ▶ Back to normal as soon as possible, but with some minor digital additions that proved to be useful, such as:
- ▶ Digitalize large lectures for the sake of small scale education.
- ▶ Increase the research-intesiveness of education by digital means.
- ▶ Make digital an option for short appointments outside of education, such as with the student advisor.

On what points do we want go back to 'normal' as soon as possible?

We want to get rid of most aspects of corona education and research as quickly as possible. The University Forum endorses the ambition to be a “campus university”; a university where on-site education and research always remain an important, if not the most important, part of our activities. The alternative would be to continue digitalization, which would involve various drawbacks. First of all, we must not forget that rhetorical and social skills are also part of the competences that we at the UvA want to pass on to our students, something that you build up much more easily in a physical presence. Moreover, a significant proportion of students are less able to absorb information when they attend a lecture digitally than if they were to do so on location. Since this can vary enormously per student, hybrid is a good solution.

Furthermore, with far-reaching digitalization, it becomes even more difficult to justify expecting international students and staff (or Dutch people who live far away from Amsterdam) to move to Amsterdam, which would mean the deathblow for student life and the academic community as we know it. Teachers are already noticing that fewer students live in Amsterdam and their long travel time means that the threshold is high for joining short or non-mandatory appointments. For international students, the difference in time zone makes it difficult to make and attend appointments. Ultimately and maybe counterintuitively, digital flexibility means that every interaction must be planned in advance, which means you have to sacrifice spontaneity. That is a real shame. Another thing we want to get rid of quickly is the lack of study places. For many students, these places are very important for their study performance, but above all for the social aspect of studying.

Perhaps the greatest frustration of students and an important reason for wanting to return to normal as soon as possible is the difficulty in digitizing exams. In the past year, lecturers found themselves in a balancing act between the risk of facilitating fraud or compromising the privacy of students. Alternative, less fraud-sensitive exam forms such as writing assignments are attractive, but labour intensive.

The ambition must be to hold exams on location as soon as possible and to conduct research into better forms of digital examinations for the longer term. An option to explore is, for example, a digital verbal exam, as long as possible risks to social safety are carefully considered. What the corona crisis has also shown is that the digital domain has brought new threats to social safety. In the previous session of the University Forum, this was further discussed in the context of the advice of the Taskforce Social Safety.

- ▶ Education and research should always have a major on site component.
- ▶ A lively academic community and student life is valuable to us, but far reaching digitalization could compromise this.
- ▶ Exams should be the first priority in going back to physical locations.

What should we pay extra attention to in the transition phase?

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The dot on the horizon is on-site education and research as we are used to, with some positive digital innovations as mentioned earlier. It is important to maintain the old normal as a goal for now for two reasons. To begin with, we otherwise run the risk that “digital” will become the new standard and that students or employees will feel compelled to opt for digital, even when on-site is an option. We do not want UvA students to have to defend themselves if they want to meet physically; the “burden of proof” should lie with the digital alternative. Furthermore, the practical consideration applies that it is easier to digitize partially from entirely on location if necessary than vice versa. Because not everything can open at once, we need to think about our priorities. As mentioned earlier, exams and tutorials should go back on site as soon as possible. By maintaining a full return to normal as a goal, we create the space to carefully think about our wishes in the field of digitalization apart from corona. We must never lose sight of how big the differences are between courses when thinking about that. Another factor in this area is that although most teachers have embraced digital education as an emergency measure, there is no extensive support for this outside of crisis situations. This conversation will be continued in the next session of

the University Forum. So returning to normal is the current objective, but the route to it is by no means obvious.

For the time being, we want to offer teachers and students who are afraid of becoming infected the opportunity to work or study remotely, but there must be a limit. The choice of distance also has (negative) implications for fellow students and colleagues who do want to be on location. The challenge for the UvA is to determine where exactly that boundary should be drawn. In any case, it is important to properly inform that decision with information about the precise contamination risks on the UvA campuses, but also in public transport. Another uncertain factor is that although we have a good overview of the Dutch vaccination program, this does not apply to all other countries. How do we organize safe access for all international students, some of whom may come from countries with lower vaccination coverage? Finally, we must conclude that the willingness to return to location regularly is not the same everywhere. For a significant part of the students it will be the case that digital education was very comfortable, without travel time and from home. Some of the employees also enjoyed working from home. To prevent working and studying remotely from unintentionally remaining the norm, we at the UvA will have to be clear about what we expect: first back to normal and from there we will look further.

- ▶ **The ‘dot on the horizon’ for the transition should be the pre-corona situation.**
- ▶ **We must avoid digital becoming the norm by making our expectations clear towards students and staff.**
- ▶ **There are huge differences between departments and programmes that need to be taken into account.**
- ▶ **Keep in mind that support for digital education outside of crisis situations like a pandemic is not widespread.**
- ▶ **The question of whether and how to digitalize further should not be based on the corona crisis, but at the most be informed by it.**



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