

# UG Vision on Student Well-being

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## Executive summary

The Taskforce Student Well-being<sup>1</sup> hereby presents the approved vision on student well-being. Starting point for this vision is the definition on student well-being of the UNL which is, after minor adjustments, adopted by the UG:

*Student well-being is how students feel about themselves and (aspects of) their life (e.g. mental, physical, social, financial). This is emphatically broader than mental health alone; it also entails a degree of physical, social and cognitive well-being that is characterised by resilience, which allows personal and academic development to optimally flourish and which promotes student success. For their well-being, it is important that a student is able to make use of their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of student life, can work productively to further their personal development, is able to maintain a balance between positive and negative aspects of student life and feels included and free to participate in the academic community and society in general.*

This vision is a whole-university vision on student well-being. The UG vision proposes that in order to be able to contribute effectively to student well-being we need to invest in student well-being in three ways namely, via the person-focussed domain that is about ‘personal development and support’, the relational domain which aims at ‘community building’ and the didactical domain which entails the ‘learning environment’. Within these domains six general goals are formulated on how the UG can contribute to student well-being:

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### **Person focused domain - Personal Development and Support:**

1. Supporting all students in their personal development, including building resilience, coping with stressors and empowering students to flourish throughout and after their studies.
2. Supporting a healthy lifestyle

### **Relational domain - Community Building**

3. Creating a safe, supportive and inclusive community throughout every stage of the study career
4. Clear communication about student wellbeing and sources of support

### **Didactical domain - The Learning Environment:**

5. Train and equip (teaching) staff with (didactical) tools and skills that promote well-being
6. Improving the study feasibility of the programmes

The Taskforce student well-being argues that we need to embrace a whole-university approach to contribute to student well-being. This means that, in order to make an action plan on student well-being work effectively, the central departments of the university, such as Student Service Centre, University Services, ESI, TAG, as well as all the faculties should work together. Faculties cover most of the contribution we can make as a university to student well-being, because of their closeness to students in day-to-day interactions.

## **Introduction and background**

The Strategic Plan '21- '26 'Making Connections' states that the University of Groningen (UG) wants to support the well-being of staff, PhD candidates and students. General well-being is a recurring important theme in the UG strategic plan, and is picked up in different projects in this strategic period. The Taskforce student well-being was commissioned to draw a vision on *student* well-being, which is related to student success. Student success is defined in the strategic plan as: "the personal and social maturation of the student's performance". The UG strategic plan states that the university wants to monitor and contribute to students' well-being and create a safe environment, recognising that well-being and social safety are essential factors in student success.

Student well-being has been a cause for concern for some time now. Signals such as the increasing stress complaints among students, performance pressure, the fear of missing out and the influence of social media on the self-image of students, led in 2018 to the drafting of a report on student well-being and to a joint action plan for student well-being by the national network on student well-being and inclusion (ECIO)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> ECIO stands for "Expertisecentrum inclusief onderwijs". Retrieved from: <https://www.ecio.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/Actieplan-Partnership-Studentenwelzijnversie-def.pdf>

The Corona-pandemic and recently published reports of, among others, the Trimbos Institute (2021)<sup>3</sup> show the urgency of thinking about what the university's role is in contributing to student well-being. At the same time the Corona pandemic also showed the resilience and adaptability of students. Both nationally and at the University of Groningen, student well-being has moved up on the administrative agenda. This has led to the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) drawing up a vision that has been adopted by the national Rectors' Consultation Committee<sup>4</sup>. In the Autumn of 2021, the UG discussion on student well-being got started in the Commission on Educational Strategy (COS), which gave first insights into what should be captured in a UG- vision on student well-being. In the Spring of 2022, the Board of the University of Groningen commissioned the Taskforce Student Well-being to develop a UG vision on student well-being and to draw up an action plan on how the university should contribute to student well-being.

By means of different stakeholder sessions, in which the UNL-vision on student well-being served as a background, the Taskforce collected input for the UG-vision. In the stakeholder sessions, students, lecturers, academic advisors<sup>5</sup> and SSC- professionals were consulted. It resulted in fruitful discussions about what student well-being entails and what factors influence student well-being and should be taken into account when drafting an action plan.

This UG-vision document is ordered as follows. First, the legal obligation of the university with respect to student well-being will be addressed, as well as the mutual responsibilities of students and the university in contributing to well-being. Second, a definition on student well-being will be formulated and will capture how the university perceives student well-being. Subsequently, it will describe what a whole-university approach on student well-being will entail and lastly, it will outline how the UG-vision on student well-being will be translated into practice.

## Legal context and responsibilities

The Higher Education and Research act (WHW) prescribes not a general defined legal duty of care for universities when it comes to student well-being. However, related to the topic of student well-being the Higher Education and Research act (WHW 7.34 d & e<sup>6</sup>) states that being registered as a student provides students with the right:

- To use special provisions and services of student counsellors (7.34d)
- on study guidance; with special attention to the guidance of students who belong to an ethnic or cultural minority whose participation in higher education lags behind to a significant extent compared to the participation of Dutch citizens who do not belong to such a minority (7.34e).

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<sup>3</sup> Trimbos Instituut (2021). Monitor Mentale gezondheid en Middelengebruik Studenten hoger onderwijs. Deelrapport I. Mentale gezondheid van studenten in het hoger onderwijs. Retrieved from: <https://rivm.openrepository.com/handle/10029/625362>

<sup>4</sup>

[https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderwijs/EN\\_UNL\\_vision\\_on\\_student\\_well-being.pdf](https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderwijs/EN_UNL_vision_on_student_well-being.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Some faculties refer to academic advisors as study/student advisors

<sup>6</sup> <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005682/2021-09-01>

Recently, within a thematic meeting of the national network on student well-being and inclusion (ECIO) the duty of care of universities following Higher Education and Research act was defined<sup>7</sup>:

“The duty of care of an educational institution towards a student concerns the care to offer good education and to guarantee the quality of the certificate to be issued.

This is done by:

- providing education (including qualitatively sound supervision);
- offering (good quality) exams;
- facilitating students who need additional facilities to follow education and take examinations because of physical or mental limitations.
- ensuring a safe learning climate.”

Clearly, the duty of care of universities is limited and very much directed to students with special needs and providing a safe learning climate. It does not cover the duty to contribute to all students' well-being.

The UG wants to go beyond the legal duties of care and make an active effort to contribute to student well-being. In doing so the UG sees, besides a responsibility for the university, also a responsibility for the student. This is also in line with UNL-vision on student well-being: “ (...) the degree of freedom and autonomy experienced by students at the university is typical of the academic foundation. The successful realisation of this foundation emphatically entails a task and responsibility on the student's part”<sup>8</sup>. Thus, students, lecturers, administrators, support staff, professionals from the student support chain, decisionmakers, policy makers (i.e., all members of the university community) all have a responsibility to contribute to student well-being from within the boundaries of their respective roles and responsibilities<sup>9</sup>.

## UG definition of student well-being

Before turning to the definition, it should be noted that there is no generally accepted definition of well-being in literature.<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, well-being could be described as how a person feels about themselves and (aspects of) their life (e.g. mental, physical, social, financial). There are positive and negative indicators of well-being. Examples of negative indicators of well-being are stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout. Examples of positive indicators are happiness, positive affect, and satisfaction with life. A person's well-being is impacted by internal (e.g. personality, lifestyle, coping) and external factors (e.g. learning environment, stressful life events, relationships with others) and can fluctuate over time. Setbacks, stress, and challenges are part of life, so one cannot expect to always experience high levels of well-being. For students, life stresses have to do with, among others, becoming independent, relationships,

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<https://ecio.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/Verslag-themabijeenkomst-Zorgplicht-24-maart-2022.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> UNL vision on SWB, p.4

<sup>9</sup> Where these responsibilities and boundaries begin and end should be worked out in one of the working groups.

<sup>10</sup> Kiltz et al. (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.578378>

housing, finances, stresses related to the study, intercultural challenges and challenges related to personal- and professional identity development. One cannot avoid life challenges, but one can develop skills to manage these challenges and become more resilient. Being able to adapt, experiencing autonomy to manage challenges and expectations of life and society is of crucial importance for achieving or maintaining high levels of well-being<sup>11</sup>.

Taking this background information into account, the UG uses the slightly adapted<sup>12</sup> UNL definition of student well-being:

'Student well-being is how students feel about themselves and (aspects of) their life (e.g. mental, physical, social, financial). This is emphatically broader than mental health alone; it also entails a degree of physical, social and cognitive well-being that is characterised by resilience, which allows personal and academic development to optimally flourish and which promotes student success. For their well-being, it is important that a student is able to make use of their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of student life, can work productively to further their personal development, is able to maintain a balance between positive and negative aspects of student life and feels included and free to participate in the academic community and society in general.'

## Whole-of-university approach to student well-being

We believe that contributing to student well-being requires a focus on three domains<sup>13</sup>, namely on the person-focused domain, relational domain and didactical domain. Investing in all these domains makes our approach a whole-university approach to student well-being. The whole-of-university approach takes place across departments and faculties.

The person-focused domain entails approaches aiming at sharing knowledge about well-being, offering practical tools enabling students to work on their own well-being, and fostering autonomy in students to deal with the demands of their environment. It is the differentiated -personal- support that is mostly offered by the student-support chain, that is to say: lecturer/tutor, academic advisors, student psychologists, trainers and student counsellors. The relational domain contains approaches that are focused on three levels of interactions: (1) between students and their peers, (2) between students and staff and (3) between students and the university, faculty and study programme. For instance by having welcoming meeting spaces, fostering contact with alumni and by getting students and teachers to work together on a common task<sup>14</sup>. Lastly, the didactical domain entails all the approaches within the learning

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<sup>11</sup> Huber M, Knottnerus JA, Green L, Horst H van der, Jadad AJ, Kromhout D, et al. How should we define health? *BMJ* 2011, 343(4163):235-237.

<sup>12</sup> We changed the order of the sentences of the definition, and slightly reformulated the last sentence. No further substantive changes were made.

<sup>13</sup> Following also the research results of: Deunk, M., & Korpershoek, H. (2021). *Studentenwelzijn in het hoger onderwijs: Een overzichtsstudie van veelbelovende aanpakken voor docenten(teams), opleidingen en instellingen*. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

<sup>14</sup> Deunk, M., & Korpershoek, H. (2021). *Studentenwelzijn in het hoger onderwijs: Een overzichtsstudie van veelbelovende aanpakken voor docenten(teams), opleidingen en instellingen*. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

environment that could foster wellbeing. One could think of examples, for instance, applying activating and connecting didactics within teaching and focusing also on the structure of the programmes (for instance the types of assessment and the study schedule). In this respect, the university expects lecturers to be aware and open to well-being issues and know how to respond and refer students to other sources of support. The university does not expect lecturers to provide mental health care to students.

Interventions within these different domains have been found to be efficient in contributing to students' well-being (see overview study of Deunk and Korpershoek, 2021). These interventions will help students to integrate and find their way in both the academic and social system as shown by Tinto (1975)<sup>15</sup> academic and social integration will result in lower dropout intentions amongst students and in higher student well-being (Deunk & Korpershoek, 2021).

## From vision to practice

To obtain concrete input on what goals we should achieve in each domain stakeholder sessions were organised. We translated the input from this session into goals and categorised them within the different domains. The results are presented below. Please note that, because the domains are interrelated, some goals fit within more than one domain. For instance, adequate information provision to students and staff can be considered as an important goal within each of the different domains. These are the most important suggestions, realising that the list may not be complete.

### **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT (PERSON-FOCUSED DOMAIN)**

1. Supporting all students in their personal development, including building resilience, coping with stressors and empowering students to flourish throughout and after their studies.

By means of:

- Offering adequate, sufficient and professional support by the student support chain for (individual) students which contributes to students' dealing with challenges related to student-life.
- Developing a plan on how to foster further personal development in students, also for those who already cope well with their stresses, to further empower them to flourish throughout and after their studies.

2. Supporting a healthy lifestyle

By means of:

- Enabling students to make informed choices about recreational activities and their impact on their mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being by, for example:
  - Providing opportunities for physical exercise.
  - Sharing information on healthy eating, drug- and alcohol use, gambling and gaming.

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<sup>15</sup> Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 1, 89-125

- Inform students where they could go for (external) support when they are dealing with questions or concerns about risky health behaviours (alcohol, drug, gambling and gaming).

### **COMMUNITY BUILDING (RELATIONAL DOMAIN)**

3. Creating a safe, supportive and inclusive community throughout every stage of the study career

By means of:

- Supporting and collaborating with student organisations in their efforts to socially and academically integrate students.
- Adequate guidance for individuals who experience personal and study-related challenges and distress.
- Minimising the difference in starting position by offering those students who need it suitable support and guidance, amongst target groups are: students with disabilities, different national backgrounds, first generation students, etc. Linked to the D&I policy and office.
- Raising awareness, destigmatize and normalise discussions about mental health.

4. Improving communication

By means of:

- Improving the quality of information on where to find support for students and (teaching) staff.
- Having a communication strategy about student well-being focused on students (prospective and current) and (teaching) staff.

### **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (DIDACTICAL DOMAIN)**

5. Train and equip (teaching) staff with (didactical) tools and skills that promote well-being

By means of:

- Providing teaching staff with knowledge and skills about how they can contribute to student well-being within their didactics.
- Training for teachers and academic advisors about (1) how to signal worrisome behaviour and (2) how to refer students within the student support chain or outside of the university.
- Increase knowledge in teaching staff and all professionals from the student support chain<sup>16</sup> about where their responsibility for student well-being begins and ends.

6. Improving the study feasibility of the programmes

By means of:

- Improving the planning and structure of the academic year, at the institutional level (e.g. holidays) and at the level of a study-programme (e.g. planning of exam periods, types of assignments);
- Removing as much as possible the stressors from administrative processes (registration/enrollment, BSA-procedure, requesting special provisions, etc.)

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<sup>16</sup> Academic advisors, student counsellors, trainers and psychologists.

## To conclude

The Taskforce student well-being provides a vision on which a whole-of-university action plan on student well-being can be created. Now that the whole-of-university vision on student wellbeing has been adopted by the university, thematic working groups will be installed to further examine what is required to achieve the set goals. The working groups (composed by professionals and students) will be asked to come up with concrete suggestions for improving student well-being which will be taken into consideration for the whole-of-university action plan on student well-being.

The Board of the University supports this whole-of-university vision on student well-being and highlights two points of attention for the working group in developing action plans. First, initiatives to promote student well-being should focus primarily on increasing resilience and the autonomy of students and aim for amplification. Second, interventions in the learning environment should not focus on broadening teachers' duties with for instance caring tasks, but on knowledge- and skill development of inclass didactics fostering student well-being (linking to the TAG- Community of Practice Student Well-being) and knowledge for lecturers about the UG support structure for students.