REPORT FOCUS GROUPS STUDENT WELLBEING

Results and recommendations of Focus Groups at the Faculties and Student Support Service

Content

1. Introduction

This report presents the results of Focus Groups that the Student Wellbeing Program organized in April and May 2021 within all faculties and the EUR student support service. The reasons for organizing these Focus groups were (1) to substantiate the focus of the project plans of the Student Wellbeing Program and (2) to give direction to interventions for the National Education Program (NPO) and possibly to the implementation of other actions to promote student well-being in education.

In addition, the worrying results of the EUR Student Wellbeing Monitor were a reason to organize the Focus Groups. The monitor was launched in December 2020 to capture a "snapshot" of students' general health, wellbeing and academic success, and to monitor how the situation evolves over time, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are critical and worrisome, with a large proportion of students dealing with symptoms of poor mental health and low levels of wellbeing. Approximately 10% of all EUR students have completed the monitor (N=3769). This can be esteemed as a good result and the representativeness of the sample seems good, however some bias cannot be excluded.

In sum, the results indicated that students are experiencing diminishing motivation, poor working environments, techno-stress and difficulty concentrating. Students also feel a big lack of social interactions. Almost half of surveyed students are severely lonely, while 38.34% are moderately lonely. Furthermore, approximately 70% of students experience higher than normal stress and clinically significant anxiety symptoms, and almost 1 in 5 of surveyed students are experiencing possible burnout. Also, mood problems are frequently reported. That is, 47.9% of surveyed students are experiencing moderate to severe depression symptoms. The monitor indicated as main sources of stress the high study pressure, lack of social interaction and motivation. In addition, personal problems, daily obligations and financial future play a role.

It is our responsibility as a university to protect and promote the welfare of our students and provide them with an environment in which they can thrive. The results of the Focus Groups are, in combination with the Monitor Student Wellbeing, a vital tool that can guide policy of university, faculties and student support services and can generate new student-oriented initiatives at EUR. In the final chapter of this report we will present our recommendations.

2. Focus groups: the set-up

The Student Wellbeing Program initiated focus groups with students, lecturers and study advisors from each faculty, as well as with the EUR student support service team. These focus groups were part of the 'Student Support' project and took place in April and May 2021.

The goals of the focus groups were: (1) to develop a vision within each faculty on what student wellbeing and student success includes and (2) to explore the current student support structure and needs for improvement.

Separate focus groups took place with either students or employees. Our goal was to include four to eight participant per group, in which we succeeded almost all times. Participants were recruited via

approaching the educational directors and presidents of faculty councils and program committees. Participation was voluntary. In total, 44 students, 43 teachers/study advisors, and 9 university psychologists/coaches participated in the focus groups. Every faculty was represented.

Focus groups were led by a Student Wellbeing Program team member who moderated the discussion with the goal of facilitating free discussions of key topics between participants. The audio was recorded (all participants consented) and used for the minutes of the sessions.

During all focus groups, the following topics were discussed:

- How would you describe student wellbeing?
- Which issues do you believe have the largest impact on student wellbeing (on individual and university policy level)?
- How would you describe student success?
- Which issues do you believe have the largest impact on student success (on individual and university policy level)?

In addition, the following topics were discussed in either student or employee focus groups:

All employees:
- What is your current contribution to student success and student wellbeing?

Students only:
- What type of service do you need to maintain and develop wellbeing and achieve student success?
- What do you need to prevent developing problems (environmental and personal/individual)?

Lecturers only:
- What do you need on a day-to-day basis to promote wellbeing and student success?

Study advisors/student support service only:
- What goes well, what could be improved in your support services?

3. Focus groups: the outcomes

In the following paragraphs we describe the results of the Focus Group discussions for each topic above. We refer to appendix 1 for the full reports per faculty and student support services.

3.1 Student Wellbeing

3.1.1 How would you describe student wellbeing?

Students across faculties agree that student wellbeing includes being healthy in different aspects of life e.g., physically, socially, and emotionally. According to students, important factors to reach student

wellbeing are being part of a community (sense of belonging), receiving adequate support, and not having too much stress/workload. Their personal life should be in balance with their study life.

Employees agree with this. Furthermore, they describe student wellbeing as intellectual and personal development, handling setbacks, and being able to accept that not everything will go or needs to go perfectly. In other words, employees underline that students are active players in their own wellbeing and balance should not only be found between personal and study life, but also between (self-determined) goals, expectations, and obligations. Only RSM students mentioned having a good future ahead of them with good job opportunities.

3.1.2. Issues that have the largest impact on student wellbeing

Employees and students across faculties agree with each other that high workload and study pressure affect student wellbeing in a negative way. Students seem to feel like they are considered as a "number" instead of a person. Communication with EUR can be slow. Employees agree with students that (unclear) EUR policies can negatively impact student wellbeing. EUR's strongest focus is on end results, such as passing courses. They also mention that students put pressure on themselves and on other students. (Lack of) Resiliency and coping strategies play an important role according to employees. EsPhil students think that the mentality within their faculty can be beneficial for other faculties. They feel intrinsically motivated to study (and many take space to complete a double degree) and say that philosophy courses enrich their personal lives. They do not study because they "have to".

3.2 Student Success

3.2.1 How would you describe student success?

Students describe student success as a combination of good academic results and personal development, with a balance between their studies and social life. Other used phrases that seem to be linked to a feeling of autonomy, e.g., being ready for the job market, setting and achieving goals, not comparing oneself with others, being motivated and satisfied. There should also be space to make mistakes.

Employees describe student success in a similar way. It is not just about getting good grades or your degree, but also about personal development and having a good time.

3.2.2 Issues that have the largest impact on student success

According to students, the competition between students and performance pressure put upon them by EUR (BSA) have a large impact on student success, in a negative way. Grades are being ranked (in Osiris) and compared. Furthermore, experiences in personal life and how someone copes with them, including making mistakes (resiliency), and support and feedback systems have impact on student success. ESPhil students say that only at their faculty, there is space for personal and general development, whereas other faculties merely focus on being prepared for the job market.

Employees are quite elaborate on this topic. Like students, employees describe the competitive (and comparing) culture as an issue for student success, as well as a high workload and emphasis of EUR on

results. The fact that EUR strives for excellence is mentioned often. There is no time to reflect or take a pause. Communication done by EUR should be clearer in a broader sense and particularly when it comes to wellbeing and the support that is available.

Employees also make clear that teachers, including the way they offer support, play an important role. In addition, they describe individual factors that impact student success, e.g., family situation, personal life experiences, life perspective, role models, and vulnerability. Employees of ESL indicate a certain "complain culture" in which students find it difficult to take own responsibility.

3.3 Student needs

3.3.1 Students: What type of service do students need to maintain and develop their wellbeing and achieve student success

Support personnel as well as the *information* concerning available support personnel (and systems) should be more easily accessible. Students from all faculties make clear that there is a need for visibility and clarity concerning help services that are available at EUR. For example, not all students know about the work of university psychologists. Clarity could be created via a roadmap or infographic, which makes clear where to go to when experiencing certain problems, making clear what the options are. There is a strong need for an overview. RSM students suggest having coaches, since psychologists are not that approachable. EMC students also suggest frequent personal coaching, done by senior year students. Students across faculties agree that more study advisors and counselors are needed. ESL students also say that not all study advisors do their jobs well enough and better training is preferred. At ESPhil, someone (e.g., a 3rd year student) is designated as "wellbeing employee". This person shows other students where to go to when in need of support. This could be (part of) a solution for other faculties, since students notice that study advisors are often overburdened.

Students agree that a general mind shift at EUR would help them to maintain and develop their wellbeing and achieve student success. EUR should show more empathy, have more faith in students, and have a more qualitative approach. A specific example from ESSB students: they do not want to be treated as numbers. They want email addresses or phone numbers so they can actually speak to a person, instead of filling out contact forms.

In addition, a cross-faculty theme amongst students is socialization. They want to feel connected and need EUR to facilitate this. They want to easily get in touch with other students (with similar interests), be able to book places on campus to meet-up and attend different events.

Some faculty-specific points came up. EUC students want to be included more in policy and prefer more student representation. ESL students mention a less positive attitude from their faculty towards students, which should be improved. ESHCC students also took into account teacher's feelings. According to them, teachers deserve more compensation and need support, since helping students can be an emotional burden to them.

3.3.2 Students: What do they need to prevent developing problems

Across faculties, there is an overlap between needs to prevent developing problems and needs to maintain and develop wellbeing and student success. Students agree that easily accessible support services and clear information about them are needed and faculties should function as a safety net. Furthermore, students agree that EUR should have an empathetic tone of voice and a more personal approach. There should be time for personal development and time to rest.

Both ESL and RSM students mention that the mentorship that is available for 1st year students should also be available for 2nd and 3rd year students. Other needs that students describe are quite faculty-specific (see also Appendix 1). For instance, EUC students indicate a toxic alcohol culture, EMC students suggest mandatory coaching, RSM students indicate more social needs (events), ESSB students want better curriculum planning and suggest a general practitioner available at EUR (especially for international students), and ESHCC students need the gap between students and teachers to be smaller.

3.4 Employees: Current contribution and needs

3.4.1 Lecturers, study advisors, and student support team: Their Current contribution to student success and student wellbeing

Lecturers and study advisors across faculties underline the importance of being approachable to students, both literally and figuratively. This way they can create a safe environment for students to ask questions. The current focus is mainly on reacting/being reactive, since they do not have the flexibility and room to be proactive. Lecturers contribute to student success and student wellbeing by making their contact with students personal, being there for students also outside-of-class hours. They know, however, that it is not possible to give every student personal attention. They feel like they have a signaling function, because they are often students' first contact person at the university, which can be hard. Employees from different faculties (ESHCC, RSM, ESHPM) mention their open hour/plenary question hour for students as an important contribution.

Another recurring topic is teaching students how to deal with failure and teach them that they do not have to be perfect (or overachievers) and that mistakes are there to be made.

Lecturers and study advisors across faculties also contribute to student success and student wellbeing by providing information on these topics and by referring them to other help sources.

ESE employees indicate specific contributions, such as giving workshops on how to deal with stress, creating a clear policy, the study buddy program (in cooperation with the EUR Living Room), and a thesis group. ESHPM employees acknowledge that problems of students can be "too small" to get help from university psychologist. They offer specific workshops on inspiration, motivation and wellbeing.

3.4.2 Lecturers: Their need on a day-to-day basis to promote wellbeing and student success

Across faculties, two needs can be derived from lecturers to promote student wellbeing and student success on daily basis. First, they need training and tools, so they can create a safe environment, develop stronger awareness and coaching skills, learn about socialization, and know how to refer

students. Their exact role in student wellbeing should be clearer. An overview of everyone's role, and demarcations in responsibilities would be useful.

The second across-faculty need has to do with improving communication. More and better communication between teachers, but especially between tutors/teachers on the one hand and study advisors on the other hand is needed. Privacy regulations seem to hinder communication between study advisor and teachers (ESPhil). Communication towards students should be clear-cut (knowing who to refer to and how). Whereas lecturers from certain faculties indicate to need more time for personal attention (ESL, ESHCC, ESPhil), lecturers from RSM feel like they do enough, also since students already received an introduction on how wellbeing systems work at EUR. EUC lecturers want to be connected to EUR more.

3.4.3 Study advisors and student support service team: What goes well and what could be improved in your support services?

An often-heard positive response is that students do not seem hesitant to get in touch with study advisors. In general, accessibility, visibility, approachability, as well as satisfaction about the contact is good. It is not always clear to students, however, what study advisors can help with. ESE study advisors notice a threshold for students to reach out to them. ESSB study advisors notice that internationals reach out to them less.

Study advisors across faculties agree that either more time or more human resources are needed to give students personal attention and ensure the quality of their work. Across faculties, they also notice long waiting lists for students when referring them to university psychologists. The EUR student support service team agrees that more FTE is needed. At the same time, the student support service team underlines that there should be more focus on students finding support from peers and that the connection between faculties should be improved.

Study advisors mention that while there are lots of different support services available, there is no clear structure, policy, or focus when it comes to student wellbeing. This is needed on a central level. There should be clearance on the role of teachers and study advisors, and this should be equal across all faculties. In addition, the role and responsibility of EUR should be clearer and true commitment (e.g., from the executive board) is needed.

According to employees a decision tree could help with the above, so employees and students do not get lost in all different options. This is needed to make sure students get in touch before problems escalate. For students, the *Are You OK Out There?* platform could function as a central go-to resource. ESHPM study advisors, however, say that the current format does not help answering specific questions and students get easily lost on the platform. Different faculties opt for offering more workshops, e.g., on wellbeing in general, on perfectionism (for students) or suicidality (for study advisors).

EMC study advisors and the student support service team suggest that students should be monitored on a mental level. A special app could be used for this and could also include elaborate coaching (such as what Codarts has, the Student Life Monitor). Preventive messages could be sent to students on wellbeing (like study advisors send out messages to students if they tend to not pass their BSA).

A wellbeing employee like ESPhil has could be an idea for faculty level support (also mentioned by ESPhil students when asked for student needs (3.3.1).

4. Recommendations

The above-described results from the focus groups have provided important insights regarding student wellbeing, student success, student needs, employee contribution to these topics, and employee needs at EUR. Different action points and recommendations can be derived from these results, which we have divided into the following interrelated themes: 1. EUR mission, 2. Didactic framework and Educational models, 3. Chain of support, and 4. Information service. In Table 1 below we specified recommendations for the reinforcement of EUR student wellbeing alongside these themes. The table also indicates the budget (HEQA Student Wellbeing Program, NPO or another source) and the actors.

The EUR mission is ''Creating positive societal impact' with a strategy that is based on seven strategic priorities, from future-oriented education, to making the most of interdisciplinary potential (Strategy 2024). The results of our focus groups indicate that an overarching mission of EUR to adjust focus from study success to student success could contribute to these priorities and to creating positive social impact. The didactic framework in which EUR operates, as well as its educational models need to allow for this focus adjustment. In other words, the didactic framework and educational models should include more room for personal development and certain conditions (e.g., a safe environment, see Table 1) should be met in order to enhance student wellbeing and personal development. This is not only the university's responsibility on central level. In fact, student wellbeing is dependent on a chain of effective prevention, detection, support, and referral to care, including many different players. Active players are students (peers), tutors, lecturers, study advisors, psychologists, board members, etc. Implementing and guaranteeing the effect of this chain of support requires all players to be familiar with their role and take their responsibility. Because many different entities are involved, there is a strong need for a clear and structured information service, Eespecially when working on ambitious alterations, and even more so in these times with little offline personal contact. In our opinion, the recommendations below contribute to what EUR stands for: being one university, one community, with one goal.

Table 1: Recommendations for the reinforcement of EUR Student Wellbeing (SW)

Theme	Points of development	Budget	Actors
1. EUR-mission	**From study success to student success** a) Shared vision on student wellbeing and student success b) More focus on and room for personal development of students c) More indicators for student success than only grades d) Include the mission in the main strategy	a-d: Institutional level	a-d: Educational Deans, EB, Strategy office, AZ/SW
2. Didactic framework and Education models	**Wellbeing and personal development included in framework and models** a) Develop and implement learning outcomes on student success b) Add student wellbeing and personal development to BKO, SKO and Micro Labs c) Create a safe and personal learning environment d) Enhance student community (Unilife for faculties) e) Facilitate student contact f) Introduce personal student portfolio's	a,b,c,e,f: Institutional level or NPO d) NPO	a,b,c,e,f: Educational deans, CLI/RISBO, AZ/SW d) AZ/SW
3. Chain of support	**Effective prevention, detection, support and referral to care** a) Develop a roadmap covering the complete chain of care, including demarcation of roles and responsibilities of employees b) Train study advisors and lecturers/tutors/mentors on wellbeing and personal development (BKO, SKO, Minilabs) c) More FTE tutors/mentors/lecturers and probably study advisors to enhance personal contact and development d) More FTE university psychologists and coaches, resulting in shorter waiting times (underpinned in benchmark document of E&S) e) Train student psychologists and counselors on topics they bring up f) Stronger peer to peer support service	a) HEQA SW b) HEQA SW c) NPO d) NPO e) HEQA SW f) HEQA SW	a) AZ/SW, E&S, Faculties b) AZ/SW, CLI/RISBO c) Faculties d) AZ/SW, E&S e) AZ/SW f) AZ/SW

	g) External collaboration with general practitioners and mental health care for smooth referral	g) HEQA SW	g) AZ/SW, E&S
	h) Join consortium of universities (Caring Universities) for evidence-based *indicated* [1] prevention program and building knowledge on student wellbeing	h) NPO	h) AZ/SW, E&S
	i) Tool for evidence base *universal* [2] prevention in collaboration with Caring Universities (strengthening resiliency and personal development for all students)	i) NPO, inter university	i) ESSB/AZ
4. Information service	a) Develop an extremely clear, central information point for personal development and wellbeing of students (both online and offline). Use and improve the 'Are you OK' platform.	a) NPO	a) AZ/SW
	b) Include this information in the welcome package for all new students together with e.g. ERNA account / Eureka week	b) HEQA SW	b) AZ/SW
	c) Include this information in the first lecture of each new block in Bachelor and Master studies	c) HEQA SW and CLI	c) AZ/SW, CLI, Faculties
	d) Provide in-time and very clear information to students about wellbeing and student success, but also in general about relevant topics to them	d) HEQA SW	d) AZ/SW, Faculties

Explanation Table 1:

1. Indicated prevention: preventive interventions targeted on students who experience mild to moderate mental health problems. These include methods related to clinical therapy.
2. Universal prevention: preventive interventions targeted on all students, irrespective of their mental health condition. These include interventions to reinforce their resiliency and personal development.
SW= Student Wellbeing Program (HEQA)
HEQA= Higher Education Quality Agenda
NPO=Nationaal Programma Onderwijs
E&S= Education and Student Affairs
CLI= Community for Learning and Innovation
AZ=Academic Affairs

5. Conclusion

The goals of the current report were (1) to substantiate the focus of the project plans of the Student Wellbeing Program and (2) to give direction to interventions for the National Education Program (NPO) and possibly also to the implementation of other actions to promote student well-being in education.

Regarding goal (1), the report provides sufficient and significant reason to conclude that the current policy objectives as formulated in the project plans of the Student Wellbeing program are substantiated: improving the chain of care and developing a roadmap; profesisionalization on wellbeing and personal development for study advisors, lectures, tutors, university psychologists and counselors; organizing stronger peer to peer support; optimizing the (implementation of) information about wellbeing, personel development and support for students. All these actions are already part of the current Student Wellbeing program.

Regarding goal (2), it can be concluded that more interventions are desirable than covered by the current Student Wellbeing program. Some of the extra interventions can be set up within the NPO context. It is recommended to set up a very clear central information point for personal development and wellbeing of students (online/offline); to include (indicators of) student wellbeing and student success in the didactic framework and educational models; to deploy a tool that strengthens the student community and facilitates mutual contact; to expand the formation for tutors and lecturers and possibly study advisors; to expand the formation for university psychologists and counselors in order to shorten waiting times; to join a consortium of different universities aimed at providing evidence-based prevention programs and support for students with emerging mental health problems (i.e., indicated prevention) and developing preventive interventions for all students (i.e., universal prevention). It is recommended to include these actions in the NPO plans.

Regarding the other actions, it is recommended that the vision on student success (including student wellbeing), which has been discussed and reported by the focus groups, is included in the mission statement of the EUR and subsequently in the educational vision and in didactic and educational models. This is outside the scope of the Student Wellbeing program and the desire to give substance to this will be coordinated with the Vice Deans of Education.