

VU Amsterdam Vision on Student Wellbeing

1. Introduction

Studying at university is more than just gaining knowledge and academic skills. Most students develop their autonomy and identity during their time as students. They live in a complex society where pressure to perform and social comparison are ubiquitous. The university plays a major role in the wellbeing of students at this crucial time in their development. Learning life skills, such as self-confidence and social skills, can help students cope with the normal stressors of life and promote study success.

In this, then, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has a duty to educate students to become resilient and empowered individuals, able to face any challenge in a healthy way in order to ultimately make a valuable contribution to society. Failure to adequately ensure the wellbeing of students can lead to a negative impact on their academic and personal development. Since the COVID-19 crisis, student wellbeing has become more and more compromised, and problems that already existed have become more prominent.^{1,2} In addition, VU's diverse student population requires attention to specific groups, such as international students and students from immigrant backgrounds. The VU Coronamonitor Student Wellbeing (January 2021) showed that these groups were particularly affected. As a socially engaged and diverse university, VU Amsterdam has the task of ensuring that all students have the opportunity to develop to their full potential, not only at the university, but also in society.

This document first provides a definition of student wellbeing and then describes the vision on student wellbeing, including preconditions, that VU Amsterdam uses as a guideline for policy. The focal points that are central to this vision are: awareness, prevention, professionalization and connection. Joint responsibility, co-creation, an inclusive approach, and a safe environment are important preconditions.

¹ Results Coronamonitor Studentenwelzijn VU januari 2021

² Results survey *Caring Universities 2020, de geestelijke gezondheid van studenten tijdens de covid-19 pandemie*, available via: https://www.vu.nl/nl/Images/Rapportage_CaringUniversities_GeestelijkeGezondheidStudentenCOVID19_19082020_tcm289-949689.pdf

2. VU Definition Student Wellbeing

VU Amsterdam defines student wellbeing as a state of being in which a student relates to their studies in a positive and healthy way and can maintain a balance between positive and negative aspects of their time as a student. There is a sustained positive mental state, characterized by resilience and contentment with oneself, in which personal and academic development can flourish optimally and study success is promoted. The student can thus make a positive contribution to society.

This definition is based on a number of previous definitions and research. For example, the above definition is partially consistent with the definition of the Landelijk Netwerk Studentenwelzijn (LNS). This is based on the Australian SCOPE definition and reads, '*Student wellbeing is a sustained positive mental state, characterized by resilience, contentment with oneself, engaging in relationships and gaining experiences during one's time as a student, and characterized by the absence of mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety and depression, burnout, addiction.*'³

An earlier VU definition of student wellbeing also contributed to the formulation of the current definition. This earlier VU definition states that student wellbeing is a state of being in which a student relates to their studies in a positive and healthy way. They set realistic goals, provide sufficient relaxation, give space to uncertainty and doubt, and discuss their problems and disappointments. The emphasis is on enjoyment of studying and gaining knowledge.⁴

Finally, Gubbels & Kappe's (2017) Student Wellbeing Model was used to define student wellbeing. This model describes a motivation process and a depletion process and postulates that the balance between positive characteristics (energy sources) and negative characteristics (stressors) of the student experience can influence the wellbeing of students and affect their study outcomes.⁵

³ Noble, T., McGrath, H., Wyatt, T., Carbines, R., & Robb, L. (2008). *Scoping study in approaches to student well-being – Final report*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, p.8

⁴ Definitie Mirjam Pol, *Verder werken aan studentenwelzijn binnen de VU 2019*, p23

⁵ Gubbels, N. & Kappe, F.R. (2017). *Student Wellbeing Model*. Hogeschool InHolland.

With these previous definitions in mind and reasoned from a positive psychological point of view, the Project Group Student Wellbeing has formulated the current VU definition. We want to acknowledge that feelings like stress, loneliness, and sorrow are part of life; everyone encounters them at some point.

Therefore, we do not see such feelings as something that should be absent, but rather as something that you can learn to deal with and even draw strength from. VU Amsterdam looks at the student's situation as a whole. We have an eye and ear for the student as a human being. Personal development is seen as equally important as academic development. The model of Gubbels and Kappe (2017) ties in well with this. By strengthening energy resources and reducing stressors, VU Amsterdam can secure student wellbeing and train highly developed individuals to be valuable participants in society.

3. Vision

3.1 VU vision on student wellbeing

VU Amsterdam helps students develop not only academically, but also personally. We educate students to become socially engaged individuals with their own goals and ambitions. At VU Amsterdam, there is a shared responsibility for the wellbeing of students. Working on student wellbeing is done through co-creation, together with the student. Inclusivity and a safe climate within the diverse VU community are promoted to the fullest extent possible. We are all part of the VU community, where each member is unique, known and respected. Academic and support staff are trained to best support students in realizing their own potential and finding a balance between stressors and sources of energy. Students feel part of the VU community and have a sense of belonging within the VU community. In this way students strengthen their energy sources, reduce their stressors where possible and learn to deal with stressors that are unavoidable.

This vision of student wellbeing is consistent with VU's educational vision which emphasizes that each student is unique and known and that education teaches each student to relate to others and to an increasingly complex and diverse society.⁶ In addition, this vision of student wellbeing aligns well with the vision of student support as formulated in 2018.⁷

⁶ Onderwijsvisie VU, (2018), p.7

⁷ Visie studentbegeleiding, Report Werkgroep Studentbegeleiding, 26 November 2018

3.2 Focal Points

The VU vision on student wellbeing is outlined below in four focal points:

- awareness;
- prevention;
- professionalization;
- sense of belonging

3.2.1 Awareness

VU Amsterdam is a community in which we care about each other. We talk and learn about health and wellbeing. Student wellbeing is highlighted in such a way that the stigma around the subject of mental wellbeing is significantly reduced, both among VU students and VU staff. There is adequate attention to student wellbeing at all levels of the organization. Our education creates realistic expectations where conversations about learning goals, progress, relaxation, doubt and disappointment are facilitated. Consideration is given to performance pressure and stress experienced by students during their studies. The university provides a safe environment in teaching where there is understanding and adaptability for all students.

3.2.2 Prevention

Students are trained at VU Amsterdam to be resilient and empowered individuals/academics who are able to face any challenge in a healthy way in order to make a valuable contribution to society. VU Amsterdam hereby puts the focus on prevention and creates the conditions through which behavior aimed at increasing wellbeing is stimulated and facilitated by various roles within the organization - from student counselors and study advisors to tutors, teachers and program directors. Rather than just acting reactively, proactive efforts are made to increase students' adaptability, resilience and self-reliance. Personal development is part of the students' learning journey. VU Amsterdam therefore supports them not only academically, but also in developing personal skills or 'life skills'. An example of this is the *Broader Mind course*, in which students work with themes such as success and failure.

3.2.3 Professionalization

Teachers, mentors, tutors, etc. are trained and supervised in the area of student wellbeing by professional student counselors. This ensures that they have the right knowledge and tools to identify possible problems of students early on and refer them to the right services. Existing training courses, such as the Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs (Basic Educational Qualification), are used as much as possible for this purpose. Student counselors, who maintain personal contact with the student, serve as the hub in the wheel of student wellbeing at the VU, but are not the only point of contact. The responsibility for student wellbeing is communal.

3.2.4 Sense of belonging

Students know how to find each other and have a clear idea of the social initiatives and various study and student associations that our university and the city of Amsterdam offers. This is facilitated, among other things, by the Student Wellbeing Point and Panel, where students help each other in a low-threshold way and where wellbeing initiatives are promoted. In addition, VU Amsterdam supports study and student associations in setting up appealing and inclusive activities for all students. Students feel a sense of belonging not only in relation to each other, but also to the university, teachers and student counselors. They feel part of the VU community. International students also feel a sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam and with fellow Dutch students. By creating more connectedness, loneliness among students will decrease.

4. Preconditions

In order to optimally promote student wellbeing on the basis of the above-mentioned focal points, a number of preconditions play a crucial role. It concerns the following preconditions:

- joint responsibility;
- co-creation;
- inclusive approach;
- safe environment.

4.1 Joint responsibility

As a VU community, we have a common goal of ensuring the wellbeing of students. This VU community consists of all who contribute to, benefit from, or are otherwise involved in student wellbeing. The organization, educational staff, student counselors, and the students themselves all contribute to improving student wellbeing.

VU Amsterdam as an institution ensures and monitors the wellbeing of its students by making the necessary resources available and supporting and facilitating initiatives around student wellbeing as much as possible. Student wellbeing is an integral part of policy and permeates all layers of the organization. The objectives and policies for student wellbeing move with societal developments.

Several parties play an important role in ensuring student wellbeing:

- a) **Professional student counselors (academic advisors, student general counselors and student psychological counselors)** support students within their own responsibilities, but in doing so they observe the parameters of the 'duty of care'. When help is beyond their scope, they provide cordial transfers to an appropriate aid or care provider. For the description of the duty of care of the professional student counselors, please refer

to the Document Studentbegeleiding (2021).

- b) **Academic staff** have basic knowledge of student wellbeing and identify and refer where necessary (see section 3.2.3 *Professionalization*). This means that the responsibility of teaching staff explicitly lies with signaling and referral and not with solving care issues. The exact interpretation of the role of academic staff as far as student wellbeing is concerned will be worked out in more detail, also in relation to the role of the professional student counselors and the social safety directors.
- c) **Administrators** ensure that student wellbeing is an integral part of (educational) policy making. Educational policy focuses not only on academic skills, but also on the personal development of students. Not only study success is ensured, but also student success. Experts in the field of student wellbeing, such as the professional student counselors, the student wellbeing officer and the directors of social safety, are actively involved in this. These experts, in turn, feed administrators and policy staff with, for example, regular knowledge sessions.
- d) **Support staff** provide adequate information and tools to direct students to the right places.
- e) **Study and student associations** create social connection and bring wellbeing issues to the attention of their members.
- f) **The student** is co-responsible for (improving) their own wellbeing. The student is expected to have an active attitude towards their own wellbeing: this means that the student actively seeks help with questions or complaints and actively engages with the help offered.

4.2 Co-creation

Students are actively involved in student wellbeing policies and the initiatives that flow from it. Working on student wellbeing is a co-creation process of VU Amsterdam together with its students. Student participation councils and Student Wellbeing Point & Panel staff - themselves students - provide feedback on what is going on among students and contribute to policy development in the field of student wellbeing. Faculty contact persons for student wellbeing work closely with the Student Wellbeing Panel staff. Together they identify problems in their own faculty that stand in the way of student wellbeing and ensure that this is dealt with at the faculty and/or VU-wide level.

4.3. Inclusive approach

In the area of student wellbeing, we take into account the diversity of the VU population.

The initiatives that are set up are accessible to and appeal to all students. Everyone benefits from the student wellbeing policies. Special attention is given to specific target groups with specific wishes and needs. Careful consideration is given to the facilitation needed for the various target groups. Attention is given to how communication is conducted to the various groups. Each student experiences a sense of belonging within the VU community. Each member contributes to the community in their own way and everyone's diversity and personal growth is embraced.

4.4 Safe environment

In addition to its facilitating attitude, the organization also secures a safe climate at the university. The student feels safe to be themselves within all layers of the organization, within the entire VU community. In education, the student feels safe to discuss doubts and voice criticism. An atmosphere in which this is possible is guaranteed. There is mutual respect.