

COVID-19 STUDY

MAY 2021

The effects of COVID-19 on educational inequalities within the Faculty of Science (FNWI) of the University of Amsterdam

This study has been conducted after a successful application for a faculty Science4all grant by Diversity Talks, the Student Impact Center and the Women in the Faculty of Science (WiF) -Student Chapter. The goal was to map existing and new educational inequalities as a result of COVID-19 at the Faculty of Science (FNWI). The research consisted of developing and setting out a questionnaire and organizing focus groups. The questionnaire was sent to more than 6,500 bachelor and master students of the Faculty of Science and completed by 936 students (14.4%). At the end of the questionnaire, interested students could sign up for a focus group, here 87 students responded. In total we have 22 bachelor students, divided over 5 focus groups.

Online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on both students and employees of the faculty. Although students appreciate the extra effort by their teachers students are impacted by the decrease in contact between students and with teachers which makes studying more difficult and lead to a reinforcement of existing inequalities.

In this report, we discuss the three themes that were most frequently addressed both in the questionnaire and during the focus groups. These are education, welfare, and living & working. For each theme, the main points and conclusions are mentioned below.

Education

- Students' motivation and concentration deteriorated during online education compared to physical education. In the focus groups, the most important reason was the home situation. At home, students are less able to concentrate than at university.
- The quality of instruction has deteriorated according to students. This applies most to online practicals and tests. One of the most mentioned factors that can make a difference is encouraging interaction, both with the instructor and with fellow students.
- Students feel less connected to their fellow students. Master's students in particular feel much less connected with their studies than before.
- Students also feel less connected to the university and their program. This is partly due to the difficult accessibility of study advisors, where they waited days - and sometimes weeks - for an answer. In spite of this, many students also indicate that they find support from their student advisor

- The majority of students are not positive about (partially) retaining online education after COVID-19.
- 46% of the students indicate that they obtained fewer credits than they would have liked.
- For some students, the current situation was a reason to take fewer courses. Especially students with a physical disability indicated that they registered for fewer courses due to the effects of COVID-19.

Welfare

- The focus groups revealed that students miss structure due to the lack of physical education, with negative effects on mental well-being.
- Most students find it important and enjoyable to attend live (i.e. not pre-recorded) tutorials and lectures. This satisfies two needs. First, it provides some structure to a students' day; second, it also facilitates interaction between students, their peers, and instructors. This can also contribute to a greater sense of belonging and higher motivation.
- Students are more likely to feel lonely since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students have fewer contacts due to the corona measures. Often, students miss not only in-depth contacts, but also the superficial contact with fellow students.
- The results of the students' mental well-being appear alarming from both the questionnaire and the focus group. The perceived understanding from the program for mental health differs greatly between students. Some students found help with their study advisor, for example, others did not always experience understanding for their mental health and missed the support from the program, or long waiting lists for student psychologists.
- Students with a mental disability experienced an increase in their complaints during COVID-19.

Living & Working

- Most students have an internet connection that is good enough to follow online education. However, another 22% of students have an internet connection that is not suitable for taking online classes or tests. This is often due to having to share an internet connection with a large number of roommates.
- 9% of students find their study location unsuitable for online lectures.
- 35% of the students indicate that their study place is unsuitable for exams.
- Students who combine studying with parenthood had significantly more difficulty working without being disturbed than average.
- The focus groups show that many students would like to study at the university, to not have to spend all day in their room.
- The living situation affects the mental state of students. Whereas some students get a lot of support from their roommates or family, some also feel out of place at home. They then feel trapped because they can't go to university either.
- Many students who work alongside their studies have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis. The number of students with jobs has decreased by 28.2% since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who have lost their jobs also experience more financial stress than average.
- In addition to financial stress, losing a job brings a lack of social contact and distraction, the focus groups show.
- On average, students do not experience more financial stress than before COVID-19, but this is not true for students who feel like a minority based on ethnicity, class, physical disability, and parenthood. These groups experience significantly more financial stress since the COVID-19 pandemic