



Student Wellbeing at TU Delft in 2020

A STUDY
COMMISSIONED BY
THE STUDY CLIMATE
PROGRAM

**My
Wellness
Check**

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Executive Summary

Why?

This report outlines the findings of the two wellbeing surveys conducted at Delft University of Technology during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The unfamiliar pandemic context created new challenges and hardships for everyone around the world, especially students. To respond appropriately to the situation and help students, the Student Wellbeing Task force and Study Climate program¹ invited TU Delft researchers to design an assessment instrument that could understand the impact of the new situation on student wellbeing, and most importantly, enable institutional action in response to student needs.

How?

The instrument ‘My Wellness Check’, developed to assess student wellbeing was the result of a human-centered design process used to shape a context-sensitive wellbeing feedback system. It was used in the form of a survey in June and November of 2020, and will be used at two additional moments of assessment planned for 2021. The survey enables us to gather both, quantitative and qualitative data.

Findings

In total, we received over 6000 responses. We’ve seen that the pandemic had a significant effects on student’s life satisfaction with an average of 6.4 in June, 6.0 in November in comparison of the Dutch average of 7.4 in 2015. Further, the findings show that the approach of systematically assessing student wellbeing needs is very effective. While it highlights the different factors that affect students, it also lets students voice their ideas about what should be done about their needs.

¹ Refer to the appendix to know more about the Study Climate Program



Next steps

The results were effective in yielding administrative response by providing details to inform policy-making. For example, after having introduced policies to help students with their working environment, we now turn to supporting digital campus social life.

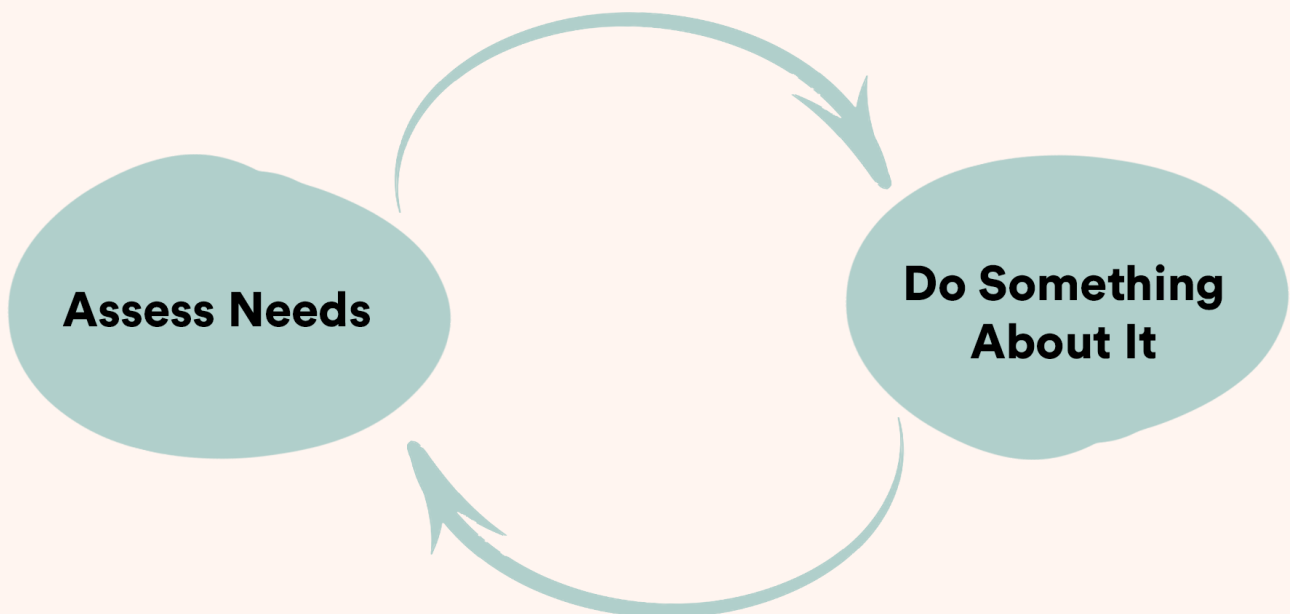
Understanding student wellbeing is a continuous effort wherein further investigation is essential. Therefore, two additional surveys are planned for 2021. Aiming to further integrate wellbeing feedback loops in universities since our findings open the possibility of prioritizing student wellbeing as a primary objective of university education.

Assessment Philosophy

The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought hardships to almost every household. From people falling ill to being locked inside the house for weeks on end, the crisis is difficult for everyone in different ways. Amongst others, universities are major institutions that have had to adapt in all their functions.

In this project, we seek to understand how the crisis is affecting the wellbeing of students and how the university can respond to students' needs. To find out what factors are important for student wellbeing, we used inclusive human-centered design techniques- to “ask the right questions.”

The purpose of the survey was not just to take measurements: our goal in assessing wellbeing was to understand the problems and inform institutional actions. We wanted to create, what we call a wellbeing feedback loop.



The wellbeing feedback loop

The Survey

Every student is important. Therefore, we wanted to give each one the opportunity to let their voice be heard. To facilitate this, we set up three criteria that we deem important the design of the survey should fulfill.

1) It should be effective at measuring wellbeing. This includes offering some alignment to other surveys e.g., to common measures of life satisfaction

2) It should be valuable for individual participants. This means it should pose a low burden (brief, easy) but also offer opportunities for positive reflection and concrete resources for action. Questions should also feel relevant to the user.

3) It should be valuable for the university administrators conducting the survey. E.g., the data from the assessment should help inform useful action (actionability).

1 5 27

My Wellness Check

Feeling
How are you feeling today?

Terrible Excellent

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Optional: Do you have anything to share about your mood today?

Previous Next

1 11 26

My Wellness Check

Tips for Others
What activities do you engage in to cope with the ongoing Coronacrisis? Do you have any tips for others?

Enter your text here

Previous Next

1 14 26

My Wellness Check

Study progress & motivation
Select all the statements that apply to you

- I feel confident about graduating on time
- I am motivated to finish my current study program
- I am generally optimistic about the future
- I am happy with how I am performing in my studies
- I feel capable at what I do
- I am satisfied with my study / life balance
- None of these statements apply to me

Optional: elaborate on your answers here

Previous Next



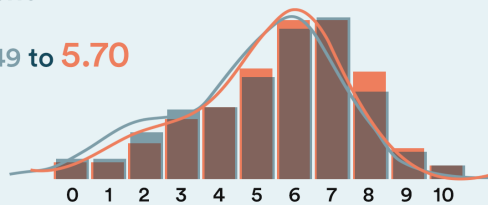
Quantitative Analysis

Scaled Items

We wanted to know how students were doing overtime. For this, we asked students to rate certain aspects of their life on a scale. The graphs below show the distributions of results from **June** and **November** surveys.

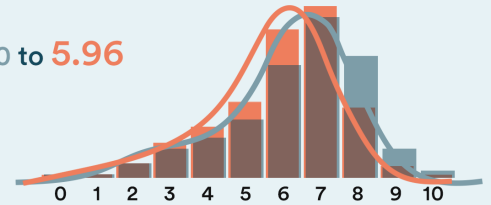
Home Study Environment

5.49 to 5.70



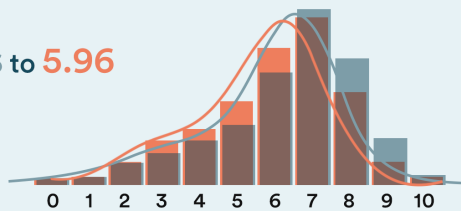
Current Mood

6.30 to 5.96



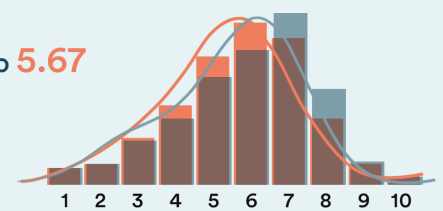
Life Satisfaction

6.36 to 5.96



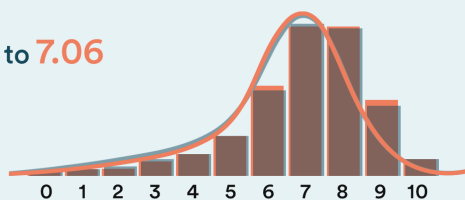
Effect of TU Delft

5.92 to 5.67



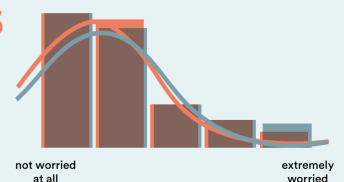
Physical Health

6.94 to 7.06



Finances

2.03 to 1.96





Qualitative Analysis

Overview

In this section, we present the qualitative results from the surveys in June and December 2020. This data has been gathered through free-text response items that have consequently been analyzed in stakeholder workshops.

Workshops

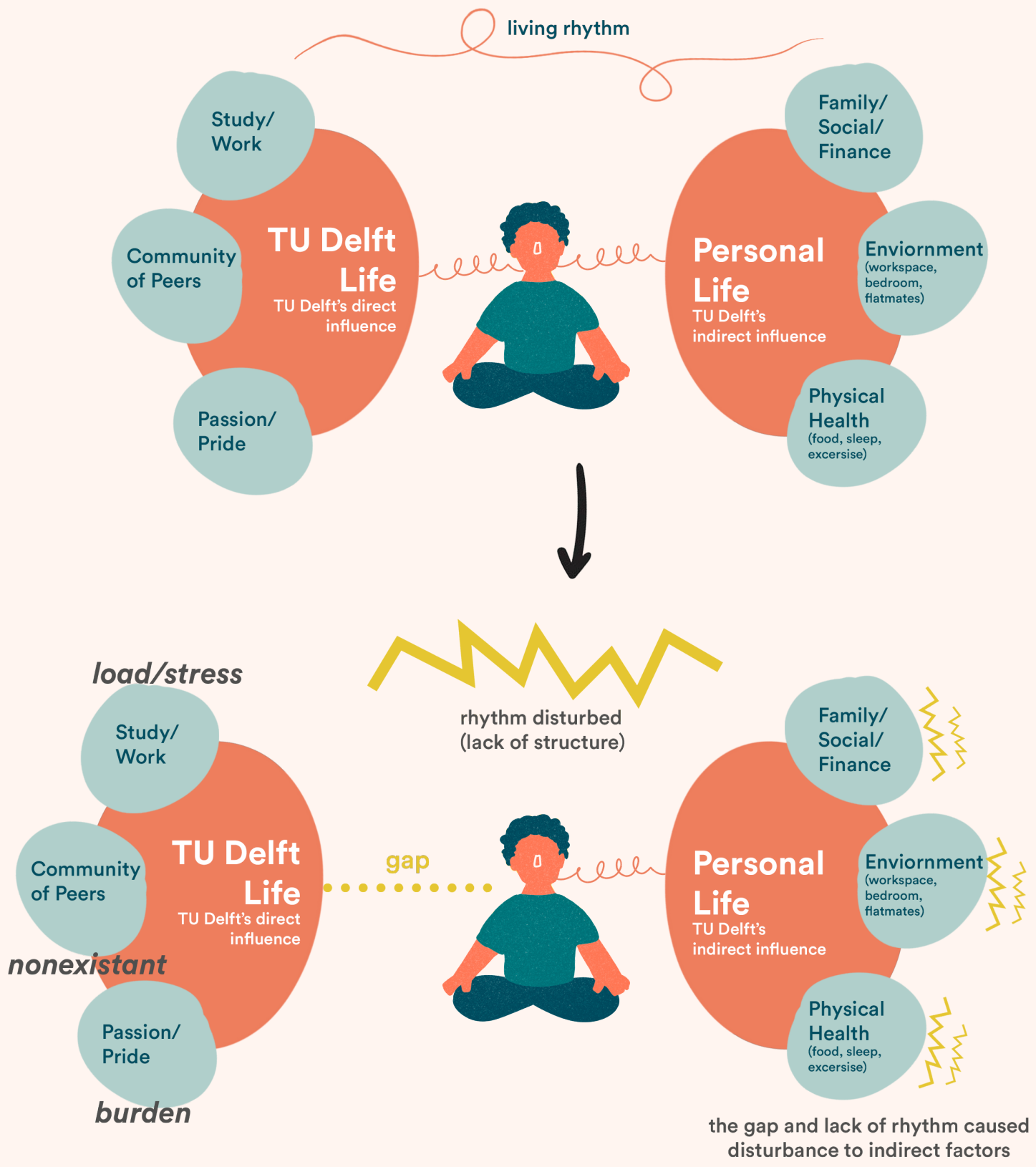
The key idea behind the workshops was to inform, inspire and involve the community of stakeholders through the analysis of the survey. Apart from analyzing the data, the workshops helped to sensitize the relevant stakeholders to students' needs, build a sense of urgency towards wellbeing considerations and prompt institutional action. The participants of the stakeholder workshops included those with most impact – i.e. students – and prominent stakeholders from within the community – e.g. student psychologists, counselors, deans, policy-makers, teachers, and support staff.

During the workshop, needs, ideas, and quotes about topics identified through quantitative factor analyses were extracted and synthesized. These further helped to understand the underlying constructs of each of these factors. The results of the workshop were then used to inspire both bottom-up and top-down institutional action. Subsequently, we will discuss the needs, quotes, ideas and examples of action being taken regarding the following topics:

1. Social Life
2. Workspace
3. Guidance and structure
4. Motivation
5. Communication
6. Physical health
7. Finances

Insights

In general we see that all the above factors (topics; social life, workspace, guidance and structure, communication, motivation, physical health and finances) impact students' TU Delft life and experience directly, as well as their personal life indirectly. In normal circumstances, these factors while not explicitly noticed/ discussed, provide a sense of structure and rhythm to students. However, during the pandemic the disconnect from the university campus, culture and infrastructure accentuates the role of these factors in shaping students' well-being and learning experience. In the next sections, we dive deeper into each of these factors (topics).



Social Life & Interactions

A big part of university life for students is the community of peers and colleagues and their social interactions with them. These act as a support system and guide students through their student life journey. Social encounters, be it structured (through the classroom, extra curricular activities) or spontaneous (in the hallways, while getting coffee etc.) form environmental cues that motivate students and give them a sense of belongingness. The lack of these social interactions due to COVID-19 creates loneliness amongst students where they feel like they no-more belong to TU Delft (community). Further, students (especially graduating students) miss impromptu check-ins with and social feedback from peers, which forms a key aspect of learning.



Social Life & Interactions

Needs

Opportunities to meet new people

“I went from being excited for my new study and meeting new people to being alone at home. It was quite demotivating.”

To feel a part of the TU Delft community

“Being on campus, studying and working assignments, makes me feel like a part of something big”

Structured social interaction

“I really appreciate how my tutors are checking in on me once in a while to check if everything is going well”

Spontaneous social interactions

“I miss the random chats at the coffee machine”

A functional online social network

“Each course uses another medium which shows the lack of support for professors and it affects the quality”demotivating.”

Social Life & Interactions

Ideas

- Peer Mentoring / Study Buddy programs- Stimulate more low-key / accessible contact moments between students through study groups, online study rooms / sessions, mentoring groups, walk-in conference rooms (open all day) etc.
- Provide an platform for students to meet each other online (rather than making it their own responsibility to meet online)
- Provide more group work and tools to facilitate group work such as Miro or Mobi.
- Default zoom group meetings after lectures; Encourage meeting with other students even if via zoom after tutoring, organize seminars, group sessions and other opportunities to share ideas between students and with external professors
- Support for Community Organizers - to create active and inclusive schedule of events
- Online Drop-In Groups to join but with a goal (coffee break, course-related, de-stress session, fitness at home session etc.)
- Online Cafeteria
- Organize dinner together
- More interaction in online lectures - not pre-recorded collegerama lectures but make it persona and interactive through tools like Mentimeter, or smaller breakout teams.
- Send an gadget or item via mail to all students. Something that is representative of TU and supports wellbeing - Makes people feel that they are part of the community.
- Make an online version of the campus where people can walk through, have social encounters etc.
- Better coordination and promotion between the associations and the TU regarding initiatives

Social Life & Interactions

Examples of Action being taken

- The UNILIFE app supports community organizers to actively create an inclusive schedule of events + lets students meet and share things with each other.
- Pilot at IO by researchers Marie van der Bergh, Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, and Rebecca Price where they organize a cohort weekly check-in for graduation students. This helps students to share difficulties, have discussions, support and motivate each other.
- X is looking into organizing online cafeteria, online drop-in groups with goals like distressing as well as dinners together.
- Christmas lunch organized by Motiv;
- Initiatives like 'Light up your night' by 5voor12 funded by Study Climate.
- The 'Walk and Talk' initiative by VSSD in association with other partners to help students increase their social contact.

Workspace

The buildings, infrastructure (furniture and fixtures) and workspaces form another key aspect within environmental cues that motivate students to study and enable them to be productive. Given that the COVID measures limit the access students have to work / study from campus, students have had to improvise workspaces at home - which are not always of the same quality and do not always prompt efficiency. Several students live in shoebox apartments wherein space constraints lead to a lack of a demarcation between work and personal life. Others highlight the lack of ergonomic furniture or a quiet study space.



Workspace

Needs

Separate spaces for studying (from their bedroom)

“The biggest problem during the corona crisis was spending 24 hours a day in the same room, since I live in a studio.”

Quiet spaces

“Our living room is dirty and filled with other people.” “In a house with 7 people noise is always a problem.”

Ergonomic workspace (furniture, lighting, temperature)

“I constantly have pain in my back and neck due to wrong posture.”

Workspace

Ideas

- Support for home office
- Guide for improving home office
- Group discounts
- Rent or borrow unused furniture
- Create more study spaces on campus
- Increase campus capacity with COVID-proofing, container spaces or rental spaces
- Collaboration with restaurants (which have few customers in the morning) to provide extra study spaces for students

Workspace

Examples of Action being taken

- The 'Laptop project' now provides cheap accessories along with laptops to make the home working space more ergonomic.
- Student researcher Daniel Hesselman (from IO) is researching home study spaces of students in his master thesis. He has developed a guide about rearranging one's room to improve work related satisfaction and well-being.
- Study Climate program in association with the Laptop project, Daniel Hesselman, ESA- Communication and Student council organized a 'Fresh Start' campaign in the 1st week of February, where students were provided easy tips and tricks to set up their home workspace more efficiently. The campaign was carried out via the Instagram page of TU Delft (TUDelftcampuslife).
- More study spaces are going to be provided on campus from March 1st 2021. (Contact Danko Roozmond or Themara Bogerd for more details).

Guidance & Structure

While working from home and online education has provided each one the flexibility to manage and make their own schedules, it has also disturbed the study and personal life rhythm for most students. Students find themselves either studying for an extended number of hours (since there is not much else to do) while not achieving the results they would like, or they find it difficult to get into the study mode due to the lack of a routine and structure. Students seek guidance to bring structure to their day, maintain a work-life balance, manage (self) expectations and overcome study and mental health related issues.

Guidance & Structure

Needs

More structure, deadlines, discipline, targets

“I would really like a bit more forced structure from the university. Right now it’s difficult to do, and I haven’t been able to build a routine.”

Help to find mental health care for severe problems

“Study advisors often know too little to help you sufficiently and waiting lists for psychologists are very long.”

Participate in extracurricular activities to demarcate work and personal life

“Activities outside of studying were great for meeting new people”

Tips and tricks about studying effectively and efficiently

“Being always at home, i guess it is easier to lose track of time and end up spending weeks in unproductive tasks”

Guidance & Structure

Ideas

- Stricter moments to work in, to set boundaries around work times, Create / keep a regular schedule
- Set clear daily study goals
- Organize collective day starts; Make, and stick to, a morning ritual
- Tips and tricks on how to concentrate better
- Tips and tricks on working ergonomically, Motivate students to keep going outside; Change positions during work day;
- Provide clear guidelines about extended thesis deadlines / guidelines
- Guides on exam procedures
- Create buddy/study groups. Provide them with guidelines. (helping each other get out of bed, knowing about the deadlines, checking how people are doing, etc.)
- Platform for students where they can share their tips/tricks and ideas how they cope with the situation
- Digital “Project Board” that shows extra curricular projects

Guidance & Structure

Examples of Action being taken

- A chat-box for talking to student-psychologists
- Clear guidance on how to seek mental care help
- Student Counselor evaluation platform to detect problematic counselors
- Having more counselors or psychologists available for counseling; Improving the online service
- Open Zoom by study counselors as introduction to services in TU

Motivation

Factors such as lack of social interaction, blurred distinction between work and personal life, unsuitable home working environment, negative news and general unfamiliarity and uncertainty with the pandemic situation contribute to students being demotivated to work /study. Students often procrastinate since there is no fixed routine / structure. This leads to last minute studying and exam preparation or working just before deadlines which builds stressful, high-pressure moments. Further, students highlight that the distance from TU Delft often deprives them of having a sense of purpose, pride, or accomplishment which fuels their demotivation. Students also mention that the unfamiliarity of the situation prompts a feeling of not being in control which acts as a demotivator. Self-doubt is another aspect that adds to students' demotivation. They need reassurance from peers and the faculty that everyone is going through the same thing and it is okay to not be in control or embrace vulnerability sometimes.



Motivation

Needs

Apart from spontaneous social interaction and feedback, structure, routine, rhythm in life and environmental cues such as workspace, peers, 'the right vibe' (all of which act as motivators), students need:

A sense of accomplishment

"..because all "nice" things disappear from the study ... there is no real reward for all the hard work anymore. because of this there is no longer really a goal to work towards."

A sense of purpose / meaning in their work/ study

"It's been hard to motivate myself to work on the thesis in the middle of the pandemic. it just seems so pointless and irrelevant considering the situation that we're in."

To feel in control (certainty / familiarity) of tasks, situations, projects at hand

"I already have an recurrent feeling of not being capable of performing and this may have been increased due to the grad project + pandemic"

Reassurance from similar others - that they are in the same position

"Whenever I talked to others who I knew were in a similar situation, I felt a bit better. it's always nice to hear that others are going through the same thing and you aren't alone with all your problems."

Motivation

Ideas

- Have workshops or guidelines on time and expectation management
- Promote doing extra-curricular activities e.g. through a study association or interactive tasks during lectures
- Reflection tools to let students find meaning / purpose in their study
- Remind students about setting goals for themselves, why are they doing the study? What do they want to do after finishing? Periodic refreshing of these goals may also be useful.
- Have internal 'excursions' of what is being done in the faculty by for example your professor when he is not teaching - inspiration sessions
- Help students build their own self efficacy by sharing other students experience in managing their difficulties
- Collapse study furniture after the work day ends
- Start and End of work day rituals e.g.. bike ride pretending to go to university
- Speed-dates with classmates / peers from the same faculty
- Plan scrum meetings with fellow students to motivate each other
- An effectiveness tracking tool - a tool that helps people have overview on their work progress on a day
- Make an overview (per study) of how courses lead into each other (e.g. why do you need all this calculus)
- Let students take interactive, fun tests to prove their skills, use gamification
- Students earn small rewards for smaller achievements like accomplishment of daily goals
- Don't punish mistakes, but give second chance, learning opportunity
- Professors also share personal stories (negative ones, drawbacks, setbacks in life - not only good ones)
- Facilitate informal conversations between peers where they can talk about how they feel --- see others are going through the same

Motivation

Examples of Action being taken

Note: Since other factors such as social interaction, workspace, structure influence students' motivation (each is a cause and consequence of the other), ideas and actions taken within those subtopics can help in improving motivation amongst students.

Communication

Because of the distance created by the crisis, communication with students has been very essential (unlike previous times). This is seen in several different aspects. First, because of the unprecedented nature of the situation and the uncertainty and unfamiliarity that comes with it, students stressed on having clear, relevant and frequent information. They want to know the what, how, and why behind the decisions being made. This provides a sense of control, and makes it easier to accept the new situation. Second, due to reduced interactions with peers, teachers and other support staff, students miss the 'human touch'. They appreciate (need) a more empathetic, human tone of voice in the communication from the university. This also applies to their interactions with teachers, where they would like teachers to be more empathetic to their situations, provide more affirmation about their work/ study and optimism about the future. For example, telling students that they are proud of them, a weekly check-in or email saying that the students did a good job coping with the situation go a long way.



Communication

Needs

Honesty, Clarity, Empathy, Consistency and authentic optimism about the future

“It is important to remember my goals for the future”

Improved communication about TU Delft services

“..it is also unclear what kind of support is offered for more specific mental health issues that are a bit less common”

Opportunities for Interpersonal Connections During Education

“It was difficult to motivate myself because of the little contact with fellow students and because everything feels much more distant and therefore less ‘real.’”

Empathetic, Interactive communication during lectures

“It helps a great deal to be acknowledged even for the silliest things especially in this difficult time.”

Clear communication about courses, exam protocols

“I am stressed out about this new system..I don’t always know where to find the information I need, or who to contact.”

Clear communication that enables expectation management

“Students are driven to feeling inadequate just because of the natural limits of their energy and attention”

Communication

Ideas

- Positive communication from department, professors, teaching staff, and (regular) emails with a concrete message rather than a message of pity
- Have a central place where all the information is, and keep that page up to date. Then email or the start of a lecture can be used for “personal” messages.
- Rethink communication channels; communicate via the student associations
- Less information about others’ academic performance – better to leave some info out and communicate less but lovingly.
- Make it personal, not only focus on what we are doing, but also how we are doing
- Have a quarterly meeting with students and inform them on current issues and how decisions are being made
- Change tone of voice. If you show other people’s achievements - do not brag. Turn it into motivation saying - ‘if xyx can achieve this, so can you..’
- Show a realistic picture with both, positive and negative aspects, such that people can relate to it. One sees that others are going through the same thing.
- Finding ways to encourage students to talk to and help each other
- Training teachers to be more empathetic in the classroom or during interactions
- Less judgment when students want to express their problems and issues
- Transparent expectations about work and study

Communication

Examples of Action being taken

- The communication dept. is redesigning the website to make the information more accessible.
- Looking into the tone, frequency and clarity of the communication through different channels.
- The UNILIFE app and TU Delft winter website are developed as central communication platforms that inform students about study related & social events happening in the TU community

Physical Health

Constantly working/ studying at home confined in a small space has obvious consequences for physical health as well. On one hand poor ergonomics leads to bad postures and affects students' physical health. On the other hand, aspects such as limited access to X, or the lack of a bike ride to and fro campus which provided basic exercise to students contribute to deteriorating physical health. Additionally, the lack of a routine affects students' eating habits and sleep patterns which further add to poor physical health.



Physical Health

Needs

(Group) Exercise

“It is important to remember my goals for the future”

Time away from their computer

“I don’t go outside anymore, I just stare at my screen all day”

Ideas

- 45 minute meetings instead of an hour to allow for breaks
- Active exercise moments for a minute or two during meetings
- Keep courses at Delft X available (online) and more accessible
- The health bus, making a weekly tour on request across campus or the city. Students can go here to get information about healthcare protocols in the Netherlands or other guidance.

Examples of Action being taken

- Promoting the practice of organizing 45 minute online calls and allowing breaks between meetings/ lectures.
- Working on making courses at X more accessible and available for all.

Finances

Owing to the general economic recession across the world, hiring freezes and lack of job opportunities, many students are facing financial issues such as being unable to pay back their loans, having lost scholarships etc. International students form a key group that voices their opinion about finances, wherein they state how they would like to have discounts on tuition fees or remissions in the case of a study delay, in the light of education moving online and several campus amenities not being accessible as before. Students feel that they are not getting their money's worth. These financial issues add to the pressure students feel to perform and finish their studies in time.

Finances

Needs

To minimize their study delay and clarity about the consequence of delay due to COVID-19

“I might be delayed due to corona virus and graduate later, so I might run into expected expenses on tuition fees and rent.”

Extra income opportunities

“It’s harder to get a job as an international student, especially in the lock-down. I need work to apply for student finance.”

Ideas

- Share models for how to deal with student loans
- Promote jobs as student assistants / Teaching assistants
- Collaboration with STUD / Flex Delft where students with financial problems can access work more easily
- Explore new ways for students to work and earn some cash
- Financial advisors financial survival tips; support from a financial manager
- More insurance coverage for Mental healthcare - especially for international students
- Increase Information provision on social safety net (uitkering)

Examples of Action being taken

- There is a module in Gezondeboel about finance which helps you make decisions about financial matters.

Conclusion & Recommendations

From the results presented in this report, it can be concluded that social interactions, study environment and communication are important aspects that contribute to student wellbeing and study success, even though these are not explicitly always considered. However, a question that needs to be further investigated is whether these factors are equally important to student wellbeing in non-pandemic times where physical distancing is not necessary. Did these factors surface only due to the nation-wide lock-down and social distancing measures?

Further, we recommend the use of human-centered design approaches to study and analyze student (and staff) well-being, since these reveal latent needs and aspirations, as well as factors - as shown by this study. Unveiling these latent, implicit factors is important to be able to design apt interventions and affect change. We also recommend that studying, understanding and analyzing student well-being become a part of institutional policy and protocols, since we see that wellbeing is a critical input for as well as output of education. These continuous wellbeing checks need to be complemented with institutional action, and hence, we highlight the importance of establishing (context-specific) well-being feedback loops within universities. Additionally, involving different stakeholders and facilitating trans-disciplinary collaboration is a must to shape impactful actions.

As next steps, two additional student wellbeing surveys are planned for 2021. Simultaneously, to continue task force action, we are investigating questions like: How are socially satisfied students managing it? What aspects of digital campus life best support needs for belonging? Why are so many more students dissatisfied with their academic performance?

Appendix

STUDY CLIMATE PROGRAM

The Study Climate Program aims to foster and sustain a climate in which students (and staff) feel welcome and are supported in their development such that they can unlock their full potential. The campus-wide movement will inspire, inform and implement changes in the study programs and campus culture to achieve what Gert Biesta calls the three functions of education: **Qualification, Socialization and Subjectification.**

Study success

Pursuing one's study and graduating in a timely and enjoyable manner, or under certain circumstances dropping out early.

Key Goals: Focus on Study success & Student success

Student success

Means that students have the opportunity to personally develop themselves, with due attention to their well-being, and that they are in control of their own study, career path.



Our Approach



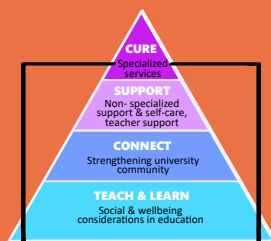
Inclusive process involving a network of stakeholders; Facilitating transdisciplinary collaboration



Run experiments and pilots with curricula; Learn, Adapt and Scale



Continuous conversations and dialogue

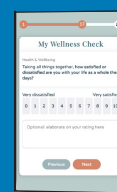


3 Types of Interventions: (Van der Bijl-Brouwer & Price, 2020)

Examples of our initiatives / projects



5 working groups working on 17 projects. Eg. Learning My Way project which trains students to apply meta-cognitive skills like self-reflection to identify own competences and make decisions.



Launched and followed through on 2 student well-being surveys and set up a student panel to get student's input and perspective



Initiated a dialogue about University culture; Framework for Student guidance.



Developed pointers for teachers to identify and respond to problems faced by students (during COVID-19).