

**Policy Plan Pro Geo**

**29th Board 2020-2021**

Due to the dynamic nature of higher education at the University of Groningen, it is necessary to carefully observe the changes around us and adapt to them. The main task of the foundation Pro Geo (hereafter Pro Geo) is to contribute to and improve the quality of the education at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences (hereafter FSS). Pro Geo believes high-quality education has to challenge students and provide them with the possibility to develop themselves in their field of education and later on in the working field. Next to that, a safe and comfortable learning environment is important to ensure student well-being.

The board members of Pro Geo will use their seats in the Faculty Council (hereafter FC) to supervise the quality of education for and the well-being of all students at the FSS. Internationalization at the FSS remains an important topic at Pro Geo. Besides this, improving communication between the FSS and students will be an important topic. In this policy plan, these and other main themes affecting the students and the quality of the programs of the FSS are laid out in the following chapters:

1. Hybrid Education
2. Language & Internationalization
3. Communication
4. Student Well-being

Through these themes we hope to convey a complete and coherent policy plan to improve the Faculty through multiple facets.

*The 29th board of Pro Geo*

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Martijn Hoekstra (*Treasurer*)

Bart Folgerts (*PC-commissioner*)

info@progeo.nl

**A. Hybrid Education**

Due to the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, the University was forced to introduce online education to its students. At the start of the upcoming academic year (2020-2021), it will still not be possible to return to the standard on-campus interaction that many are used to. Although online education has been introduced since March 2020, it is still a relatively new method of education for the University and the FSS. Pro Geo and the rest of the FSS is going to adapt to this and ensure that its quality of education will be maintained.

**A.1 Physical interaction**

For the 2020-2021 academic year, it has been decided to introduce a hybrid education method at the FSS. Online lectures will remain the main way of education. However, the FSS and Pro Geo endeavor to provide one on-campus day per week for every student. To offer all students at this faculty more opportunities to meet fellow students, Pro Geo has already helped organize several activities and is planning to use their voice in the Faculty Council to emphasize the importance of physical interaction. We will monitor the experiences of students through the Programme Committees and also the Learning Committees throughout the year (new communication between Learning Communities and Pro Geo, at the request of the Director Of Education), to learn about their experiences and improve where possible.

**A.2 Online lectures**

Next to the on-campus day, there are still a maximum of four remaining days in the workweek which will consist of online education. It is of utmost importance that these lectures are well-structured and have good quality. This part of our policy is linked to communication. Good communication on Nestor is necessary to inform students within courses, to ensure mutual understanding and avoid unnecessary uncertainties. Pro Geo believes this should take the following form: lecturers should clearly indicate mandatory sessions, lecture recording status, and assignment due dates. This should all be done prior to the course starting. Nestor and Rooster should be correct and it is important as well that the course manuals are clear and correct. This is something we will pay extra attention to in the meetings of the Programme Committees and with the Learning Communities.

**A.3 Exam schedules**

For the coming semester, it is safe to assume that exams will be held online. Previous academic year the case occurred that online exams were scheduled on their original time slots, which were dependent on the capacity and availability of the Aletta Jacobshal. These time slots were highly unfavorable in certain circumstances, being rather late sometimes (start at 18:30 or later). Therefore we will make a case in the FC to prevent these online exams from happening at these time slots, so students can make their exams on more favourable times.

**B. Language & Internationalization**

The FSS has been providing education in English for a couple of years now and it is important to maintain and improve the quality of the education concerning the language. There is a sizable number of international students and staff in the FSS that depend on this. As it started in 2017, the process of internationalization should be near complete by now, but there is always room for improvement.

**B.1 Use of English by students**

It is important that the students at the FSS have a sufficient level of the English language. This should apply for both teachers and students. This aligns with the Faculty’s stated goal of internationalization. Additional focus will be placed on encouraging professors to create groups for group projects that are mixed between international students and Dutch students in English, which will help international students integrate with their Dutch colleagues. The lecturers have to remind their students that English is the *lingua franca* in group work to ensure that international students are not left out of the group process.

**B.2 International content in lectures**

It is important that lectures have an international focus on their content. While using examples from The Netherlands is perfectly acceptable and not to be discouraged, lecturers will again be encouraged to place a focus on incorporating more international examples in their content, as opposed to only or a majority of Dutch examples, to strive for a perfect balance of Dutch and international content. The online nature of many classes this year presents an opportunity for lecturers to make changes to old slides and incorporate more international examples. This should include content from Europe as well as other continents. This with the aim to create valuable comparisons, to reflect the global nature of our Faculty and to ensure that international students feel welcome.

**B.3 Inclusivity and improvement of language use**

Involving students, especially international students, with Faculty matters (e.g. course content, activities, quality of education, etc.) is one of the most important tasks of Pro Geo. In order to make all students feel at home at the FSS, it is key to give them the opportunity to be engaged with the FSS. A growing effort has been realised over the past 5 years by the Faculty and its students to embrace the English language. In order to maintain this growth and achieve more engagement, any problems regarding a lack of English should be implemented and accepted throughout the FSS.

For example, lecture slides often still contain Dutch content which has not been translated to English. This gives particularly international students a hard time understanding certain pieces of information and they will have to ask teachers or peers during the lecture to translate the material for them. This can give international students an educational disadvantage and alienate them. Pro Geo feels, in order to improve the inclusivity at the FSS, it is crucial that the English language is upheld in every aspect of our Faculty, so also in lecture slides.

**C. Communication**

Communication has proven to be vital in uncertain times such as the outbreak of COVID-19. Pro Geo believes that proper communication is essential at any time to reduce stress and feelings of uncertainties among students and can be beneficial for their confidence. Pro Geo feels that proper communication originates from honest, open and regularly updated conversations.

Currently, almost all communication is being done online. Considering there were no lectures on campus since March, a lot of, if not all, lecturer-student interaction had to be done online. However, this is no efficient means of communicating, as there are often students with the same questions that all have to be answered by the same teacher, which seems inefficient.

**C.1 Communication between students and staff members**

Pro Geo is looking to improve our way of communication and wants to make students, teachers and other staff members aware of other possible ways of interacting with one another.

For example, Pro Geo wants to encourage students to use “posts” or discussion boards of courses in Nestor to ask teachers course-related questions. We want to achieve this by emailing all lecturers regarding the benefits of the “posts” tool in nestor. Through these means, other students with the same question can first check Nestor to see if their question has already been answered.

**C.2 Promotion of online engagement between students and University**

A lot of communication between all members of our Faculty (student and non-student) is being done via mail, skype, and other tools. As there is no better alternative right now for real-life communication than online communication, the best options at the moment are to exploit all possibilities of online communication and raise awareness of several means for online engagement. As argued earlier on, students and staff should be engaged to make use of the tools of communication provided in Nestor (posts, discussion board, blackboard etc.) to make the exchange of course-related information more efficient.

Currently the discussion boards of a course on Nestor are often found empty. A teacher could trigger the use of these if they would actively promote the usage of these and would have prepared these ‘fora’ into themes or chapters of the course. This would direct the students to the right place where they can ask their questions and collect their answers.

**D. Student Well-being**

Aside from maintaining and improving the quality of the programs at the FSS, the importance of student well-being cannot be forgotten. Pro Geo wants the students of the FSS to feel safe. Therefore, Pro Geo will listen and help them when they are not doing fine.

**D.1 Zero Tolerance**

A Zero Tolerance policy is of great importance to ensure that all students feel safe at the FSS. In the case of (sexual) harassment, or (academic) discrimination, Pro Geo wants to give students a chance to tell their story in a confidential and comfortable way. This is the reason why Pro Geo will set up an easily accessible button on their website and on your Nestor page to report any kind of harassment or discrimination. This will be done in collaboration with the Zero Tolerance Committee of the FSS.

Furthermore, the board members of Pro Geo will keep an open and understanding attitude to lower the threshold for students to contact Pro Geo directly. In this process, Pro Geo will ensure the anonymity of the students when requested.

**D.2 The role of Confidential Counselors**

To lower the threshold for students to tell their stories or talk about their problems, the role of Confidential Counselors will be important. These Confidential Counselors are a part of the study association Ibn Battuta. Pro Geo will ensure that the Confidential Counselors get all information and tools necessary to talk to students and help them out. The Confidential Counselors will be in close contact with Pro Geo to ensure that all cases are handled properly and if needed reported at the FC.