POLICY PLAN

2025/26

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Prepared by the
34th Board of Pro Geo

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Pro Geo Policy Plan 2025-2026

Introduction

We, as the 34th board of Pro Geo, are honoured to present our Policy Plan for the 2025-2026 academic year. This plan identifies issues we find relevant in the Faculty of Spatial Sciences (FSS) and our goals to improve overall student representation and experience.

This plan outlines five key points and relevant subpoints to highlight specific challenges and initiatives we believe deserve special attention:

1. Improving Education Quality
2. Standardising Course Communication
3. Monitoring Student Wellbeing
4. Increasing Student Awareness
5. Defending Education Integrity

Defining the above points will aid in directing our continued mission of student representation and educational development as members of the Faculty Council of Spatial Sciences.

Warmest regards,
The 34th Board of Pro Geo

Ryan Edelenbos	Chair
Elliot Crozier	Vice Chair
Sienna Fernandes-Hansen	Secretary
Michel Beinecke	Treasurer
Nils Müller	Programme Committee Commissioner

Email: Board Pro Geo   Website: www.progeo.nl

Instagram: @progeo_fss   LinkedIn: Foundation Pro Geo

Key terms and abbreviations:

1. **Faculty Board (FB)**

   a. The Faculty Board has the overall responsibility for direction and management of the faculty and the supervision of the quality of research and education.

2. **Faculty Council (FC)**

   a. The Faculty Council is the official representative advisory body of the Faculty. By their right of consent and/or right of recommendation the Faculty Council has a hold on teaching and education programmes, research, the budget, staffing policy, faculty finance, health and safety regulations, housing and organisational change. The Board needs the Council's consent in sections of the Education and Exam Regulations (OER) and faculty regulations. In all other issues it has the right to make recommendations.

3. **Faculty of Spatial Sciences (FSS)**

   a. The Faculty of Spatial Sciences provides education and research within Geography, Demography and Spatial Planning. The research programme TRACE includes three key research themes, Transformations, Communities and Environment.

4. **Learning Communities (LC)**

   a. LC's aim to realize good performance, create cohesion within the programme, stimulate a sense of community among students and get students in touch with the working field.

5. **Programme Committee (PC)**

   a. PCs review and provide feedback on the Teaching and Examination Regulations (Dutch: Onderwijs en Examenregelingen, OER), receive feedback and comments from fellow students, represent their fellow students, and evaluate courses and lecturers.

6. **Radenoverleg**

   a. The University Council meetings where all UC members are present as well as members of all the respective faculty councils.

7. **University board (BoU)**

   a. The Board of the University is the University's central governing body. Their responsibilities are: University strategy, development plan and budget, resource management, legal transactions, correspondence, and the approval of faculty regulations

8. **University Council (UC)**

   a. The council made up of staff and student factions that monitor, represent, and make policy decisions on a university-wide level

1. Improving Education Quality

A. Broadening Intellectual Horizons and Critical Theory

The university's strategic policies aim to increase its social impact by becoming a '*fifth-generation university*'. This means that, according to the university board (BoU), *"the University of Groningen [should] bring[...] together all scientific disciplines to work jointly on the major challenges of our time"*. Realising this goal in our faculty necessitates a continued broadening of intellectual horizons by emphasising the development of its students' critical analysis skills, enabling them to meaningfully contribute to solving increasingly complex societal issues and wicked problems. Three interrelated dimensions must be tackled to progress in this direction:

a. Advocating for more in-depth discussion on topics such as cultural sensitivity for teaching staff in order to facilitate a safe environment when dealing with topics such as (de)colonialism in our diverse faculty. An example of an event that facilitated these discussions was last year's diversity day. The short term goal is to continue stimulating and promoting similar events for staff and students to set a foundation for the long term goal to stimulate a more in-depth discussion on these topics during lectures and seminars

b. Including more critical and international (non-Western) literature, case studies, and perspectives in the design of courses across the faculty to promote a broader worldview and develop a greater understanding of how to contextualise the privileged position that Western academia, geographers, and planners benefit from, due to centuries of colonial extraction.

c. Integrating critical discussions from *political geography* into the delivery of education across the wider faculty. Socio-political power dynamics play a substantial role in spatial sciences and related research. Yet, these concepts receive limited coverage, despite the subdiscipline's relevance to the field our faculty prides itself on.

B. Diversification of Education Formats

Experimenting with education formats that promote critical discussion and debate to engage students' critical thinking skills in practical settings. This could include tutorials or seminar groups with class sizes and seating arrangements designed to support active engagement. Providing only traditional lecture formats in most courses is not conducive to productive discussion. This issue is particularly pronounced at the bachelor level, where large cohorts make meaningful collective engagement with course content impracticable. In collaboration with the faculty council, Programme Committees, and teaching staff, Pro Geo will explore how to ensure that students benefit from a diverse range of educational formats and report to the FC in which courses this issue is most relevant.

C. Centering Students in Assessment Methodology

With increasing working pressure on staff, it has been noticed that assessment methods are increasingly adapting formats that allow for more efficient grading. These include e.g. multiple choice exams and bigger group sizes and other formats that are often criticised by students for being unengaging, providing less opportunities for valuable learnings and feedback and not preparing well enough for the final thesis. Tailored to Point 1B, Pro Geo wants to ensure that all educational formats center the student experience and the possibility of valuable assessment. One central issue that has been identified are the development opportunities provided the faculty's bachelor's students' individual writing and research skills. In line with the pedagogical standards of university-level social science education, assessment should focus on argumentative analysis and the conceptual application of theories, written or oral. A more coherent programme-spanning framework that incrementally trains and assesses students' individual academic skills throughout the programme would benefit students significantly. Together with the Programme Committees and the FC, Pro Geo aims to identify which courses would most benefit from increased attention to this issue.

D. Field-relevant Digital Skills and Portfolio Development

Pro Geo recognises the need for field-relevant skills and portfolio development for employability after graduation. Individual portfolio development is an integral part of design-oriented programmes and should receive significant attention in relevant courses. FSS students have been raising concerns about the lack of digital skill development necessary for career preparation. Together with the course coordinators of design courses, Pro Geo aims to explore the possibility of students taking on additional individual work for their digital skills and to investigate whether existing opportunities, such as the minor in geospatial data science, are utilised and communicated effectively. Furthermore, Pro Geo will work towards promoting the importance of creating an individual portfolio to students.

2. Standardising Course Communication

A. Harmonisation of Brightspace Environments

Pro Geo wants to ensure that Brightspace is appropriately utilised for the organisation and communication of course content, scheduling, grading, and other relevant details that students should be aware of. Course details should all be available two weeks before the start of each course, rather than many being finalised at short notice. This has become a common occurrence across the faculty's many courses, leaving students uncertain about what to expect in the coming weeks and months and making it much more difficult to plan various commitments. Pro Geo will work with the FC to develop a long term plan for the upcoming academic years to ensure that course coordinators prepare timelines in a timely manner and monitor their success through the programme committees.

B. Transparency of Costs and Materials

Prior to course enrollment both prospective and enrolled students should be made aware of the specifics of any course-related costs they will incur. Expenses may include course-mandated excursions, textbooks, and software fees. Students need to be prepared for the expected extra costs of their studies, given the financial vulnerability students universally experience on a daily basis. Pro Geo will advocate for a detailed cost breakdown to be provided to students in Ocasys before they enroll for courses.

C. Communication of Late Grading

Monitoring late grading has been an ongoing initiative for several years now. In the 2024–2025 academic year, Pro Geo tracked grading times and communication across all programmes and identified seven instances of late grading without proper communication. Some students need their grades in time for application deadlines and should be informed of delays ahead of time, giving them a chance to work out solutions with their course coordinators. Pro Geo will continue to monitor grading

through PC feedback and work to identify where and why this problem continues to arise.

D. Standardisation of Generative AI guidelines

While official university-level guidelines for the use of large language models in student work do exist, most students are unaware of the exact rules and expectations because the document is difficult to find, organisational approaches change over time, and attitudes vary between professors. Together with the Faculty Council, Pro Geo will create a concise summary of AI guidelines that is readily available and easily discoverable across all Brightspace course environments, mitigating both uncertainty about official policy and the variance in approaches taken by teaching staff. Pro Geo will also utilise social media and our newsletter to spread awareness of the document and communicate potential developments in the matter.

3. Monitoring Student Well-being

A. Pre-master Representation

The organisation and representation of pre-master students remain an issue. With limited feedback channels and individually curated course plans, there is a weak sense of community within the cohort. Building on the previous board's initiative to appoint a pre-master representative, Pro Geo aims to strengthen awareness of developments within the faculty and advance social cohesion within the pre-master community by promoting various events and establishing a pre-master LC together with Study Advice. Through these efforts, Pro Geo hopes to significantly improve pre-master students' integration into the faculty both socially and organisationally, so their voices are not left unheard.

B. Learning Community Organisation

The Learning Communities (LCs) were established to help first-year bachelor's students acclimatise to their respective programmes in small social groups. While LCs offer valuable opportunities for student collaboration, engagement levels vary per LC, and it has been noticed that attendance rates tend to drop throughout the semester. Recognising the importance of an involved LC, Pro Geo aims to work closely with study advice and the student assessor to improve student participation, by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the current LC model. Pro Geo hopes to contribute to a more effective and motivating LC structure that encourages sustained involvement throughout the academic year.

4. Increasing Student Awareness

A. Promotion of Programme Committees

Through our Programme Committees, Pro Geo aims to ensure students' voices are heard, constructive feedback is taken into account, and it is effectively implemented. Currently, the visibility and awareness of Programme Committees and their student members among the student body are significantly lacking, hindering students' participation in shaping their education. In the upcoming academic year, Pro Geo aims to address this by facilitating lecture talks, hosting coffee hours and improving communication from the Programme Committee through our Instagram and website. In addition, Pro Geo wishes to increase transparency into the Programme Committee's output and into how student feedback is received and implemented by course coordinators the following year. Through initiatives such as our newsletter and social media updates, Pro Geo can ensure that students are made aware of changes that are being implemented based on Programme Committee feedback.

B. Visibility and Presence

A. In our aim to increase student awareness, Pro Geo wants to ensure that our role as a representative body is well known in the faculty. Pro Geo intends to do this by increasing Pro Geo's online presence on the website and Instagram and continuing the Pro Geo Newsletter initiative to inform students about relevant news and developments. Pro Geo aims to utilise social media channels to raise awareness of important issues and events within the faculty. Being that much of our work is representing students on the Faculty Council, Pro Geo wants to ensure that students are aware of how the council functions and can act as agents of change in their best interests. Pro Geo also aims to increase student engagement with the faculty's governance processes by including students in governance discussions and by promoting ourselves more effectively as a representative body.

B. Collaboration with faculty organisations, such as Ibn Battuta, will also allow us to increase student outreach. Additionally, increased communication with students from other Faculty Councils and the University Council will increase our visibility externally. Our continued presence at events such as coffee hours, external events and meetings will help us better establish a clear image of who Pro Geo is and what it does on a faculty and university wide level.

5. Defending Education Integrity

A. Budget Cuts

In light of recent political developments in the Netherlands and the growing uncertainty about public funding for higher education, academic institutions across the nation are threatened by significant austerity measures. Collaboration with affiliated student groups, promoting demonstrations, and increasing students' awareness of the issues are all important components of resisting detrimental changes that budget constraints can bring about. As such, Pro Geo will continue to communicate these issues with the student body as they develop. Alongside these initiatives, Pro Geo will continue to work to the best of its ability as student representatives and protect education quality at FSS.

B. The Future of Our Faculty

In light of the ongoing discussion on potential faculty mergers and governance changes at the University of Groningen, Pro Geo strongly advocates maintaining the independence of the FSS. The faculty's smaller scale, interdisciplinary focus, and tight-knit community are key strengths that enable both high-quality education and strong social cohesion. Merging with larger faculties risks undermining these qualities and diluting the identity and autonomy of the only Faculty of Spatial Sciences in the Netherlands. The uniqueness of the faculty is furthermore a crucial factor in promotion and attracting new students. Merging could therefore also significantly impact student intake, in comparison to other faculties, with a more stable intake.

Pro Geo aims to actively collect and represent student perspectives on how the future of FSS should be shaped. Pro Geo will mainly do this through faculty-wide feedback initiatives (surveys), involvement of the Programme Committees, and focus groups. By addressing the results of these initiatives in the Radenoverleg, to ensure that FSS students' voices are included in the decision-making process. To preserve culture and diversity our faculty has to offer. In these efforts, Pro Geo also wants to reflect on the broader implications for the future of Pro Geo and student representation in general. Maintaining connections with existing student support structures, such as study advisors and faculty staff, will be crucial during this period

of uncertainty. These relationships ensure that any governance changes will not come at the expense of student well-being or the provision of academic and personal support. Pro Geo is concerned about the impact of rising performance expectations placed on faculty staff, a problem that will likely be exacerbated by mergers or other significant administrative restructuring. Student and staff interests go hand in hand, and defending one requires defending the other.

As the faculty might undergo mergers. Pro Geo must be prepared to adapt in a way that safeguards the interests of all the students in the FSS. To support future boards in handling these transitions, Pro Geo aims to create a guideline. This guideline will outline how future boards of Pro Geo can respond to shifts in faculty organisation

The guideline will help to clarify Pro Geo's role and capabilities within a new governance structure, helping future boards understand how to position themselves, maintain communication channels, and continue advocating for students of the FSS. By offering practical steps, recommending strategies and clear procedures, the guideline aims to ensure continuity, consistency, and resilience in student representation throughout any potential mergers.

6. Concluding Remarks

Pro Geo aims to defend the independence of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, preserve its distinctive academic culture, and ensure that student voices remain central to shaping its future. We believe that this policy plan reflects our commitment to defend the independence of our Faculty and to work towards a prosperous future for all students.

We encourage all to actively engage, share ideas and collaborate with us to create the best possible environment for all students and staff at the FSS.

Warmest wishes,

The 34th Board of Pro Geo