

Stress Levels Among European Studies Students And How to Reduce Them

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Executive Summary

There has been a rise in stress-related complaints among students in The Netherlands. Although the situation seemed to stabilize, over the past year the situation has worsened. This dissertation was written to find out the current situation for European Studies students at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, and depending on the situation, write a fitting recommendation on how to reduce stress levels and improve the situation. After studying three reports conducted by other organisations and institutions, it was concluded that the stressors could be categorized into four main factors: academic pressure, financial pressure, additional activities, and interpersonal factors.

To obtain information on what the current situation is at European Studies, a questionnaire was created that has been completed by 109 European Studies students. Information that was either unobtainable through the questionnaire or research, was collected through two interviews with Dave van Ginhoven, senior lecturer, and Fee Romein, employee of the *Onderwijs, Kennis en Communicatie* (Education, Knowledge and Communication) (OKC) department at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Key findings point out that students do feel pressure at the programme. This is mainly due to a lack of sufficient guidance or support, as students perceive help received to be more result-driven instead of problem-oriented. Furthermore, students felt pressure regarding finishing assignments, performance during exams, and graduating without delay. The next main category includes financial pressure. Important findings in this section include the stress experienced as a result of the implementation of the loan system, marginal compensations for internships, and the necessity to work to cover costs of living. Additional activities proved not to be an impactful stressor compared to the other three factors. Most activities were connected to personal or team exercise and student associations, with the latter consuming most time and causing the most stress. The last factor, interpersonal issues, appears to be an important stressor amongst students who have experienced personal or family related issues.

The proposed recommendations, in order of most to least feasible, included: (1) start surveying student wellbeing within the European Studies programme, (2) improve on the existing communication framework of the programme, (3) improve mutual expectation management between students, teachers, and the university, (4) investigate the possibilities of training teachers to recognize concerning behaviour, (5) research the possibility of providing students with more opportunities to obtain working experience, and finally (6) examine the complexity of the programme and reduce the workload.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
ASVA	Acronym for <i>Algemene Studenten Vakbond Amsterdam Onderzoeksbureau</i> , or <i>ASVA Onderzoeksbureau</i> for short. The research conducted by this organisation is used in this dissertation. Translation: ASVA Bureau of Investigation.
DUO	Acronym for <i>Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs</i> , an institution that is part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The organization provides students with loans, free travel and maintains their enrollment status, among other things. Translation: Office of Education.
ES	Acronym for <i>European Studies</i> . The focus study programme for this dissertation.
Hbo	Dutch wording/acronym for the university of applied science level of education – Dutch: <i>hoger beroepsonderwijs</i> .
HvA	Acronym for <i>Hogeschool van Amsterdam</i> . An educational institution offering university of applied sciences level of education. Translation: Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.
ISO	Acronym for <i>Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg</i> . The research conducted by this organisation is used in this dissertation. Translation: Intercity Student Consultation.
LSVb	Acronym for <i>Landelijke Studenten Vakbond</i> . The research conducted by this organisation is used in this dissertation. Translation: National Student Union.
OKC	Acronym for <i>Onderwijs, Kennis en Communicatie</i> . A department within the The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Translation: Education, Knowledge and Communication.
PIC	Acronym for Person in Charge.
ECA	Acronym Educational Careers Advisor.
THUAS	Acronym for <i>The Hague University of Applied Sciences</i> . The educational institution located in The Hague, offering university of applied sciences level of education.
UvA	Acronym for <i>Universiteit van Amsterdam</i> . An educational institution offering university level of education. Translation: University of Amsterdam.
Wo	Dutch wording/acronym for the university level of education – Dutch: <i>wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i> .

1. Introduction

Over the past years, it appeared that an increasing number of students in the Netherlands experience large amounts of stress over the course of their studies. The reason for this is quite varied, as stressors lie within academics, financial situations, expectations and demands, and interpersonal relations (Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau, 2019). Lifestyles or periods in which students experience large amounts of stress can cause many problems, such as burnouts, anxiety, and depression among other things (Sierhuis, 2018). Although the situation seemed to stabilize in 2020, the coronavirus has threatened this stability as students were forced into lockdown and follow their classes online, relying mostly on their own capabilities to keep sufficient levels of motivation and determination. This resulted in numerous news sources reporting an increasing number of students experiencing psychological complaints due to excessive stress. In August 2020, Caring Universities released a preliminary indicative report after releasing a questionnaire which was completed by 8.000 students from four different universities. More than half of the respondents of this survey claimed to experience loneliness, unhappiness, and a lack in concentration. Other significant results were an increase of approximately 11% in moderate to severe depression-related complaints, and around 5% more students suffered from moderate to severe anxiety-related complaints compared to the year before (CU, 2020). This was one paper amongst others that reported on this trend, and as a result this dissertation came to its commencement; to research whether the students of the European Studies programme at the Hague University of Applied Sciences experienced these issues, and if so, what measurements can be taken to reduce this.

This dissertation was written with the goal of finding a solution to reduce stress among students by analysing the current situation at the European Studies programme at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. All academic years, plus students with a study delay, were considered. Presently, no conducted studies by either the study programme or by the university exist that are solely focussed on the wellbeing of students, with emphasis on mental health and the applicable stressors that influence this. In order to write a fitting recommendation for the programme, the research question '*How can the European Studies programme at THUAS reduce stress levels amongst students?*' and its subsequent sub question were established. First, a definition of *stress* was provided to visualize what symptoms and characteristics to focus on. Subsequently, this knowledge was applied to students to create a theoretical foundation before researching what the main causes of student stress were. A summary of the findings was provided in the *Theoretical Framework* chapter. The main factors were then used to create a survey that was sent to the students of the ES-programme, and to acquire

information that was not directly available or obtainable through the questionnaire, was acquired through interviews with THUAS and ES personnel. Consequently, all results were then interpreted and compared in the Analysis chapter. To conclude this dissertation, the key findings were summarized in the Conclusion, followed by the closing chapter Recommendations, which includes an overview of potential fitting recommendations to help the ES-programme at THUAS to reduce stress levels amongst its students.

2. Theoretical Framework

To formulate an answer to the main research question, it is important to obtain a clear understanding of the topic at hand, how to approach it and how to eventually address the issue. The following section of this dissertation will concern itself with creating this understanding by observing and analysing previously conducted studies. A list of criteria for choosing the studies used can be found in the next chapter, the *Methodology*.

One of the studies used was conducted by *Landelijke Studenten Vakbond* (LSVb), the Dutch National Student Union, and has been used as a theoretical or informative basis for a multitude of other reports, with the *ASVA Onderzoeksbureau* (ASVA Bureau for Investigation) (ASVA) study being a prime example of this. Therefore, this study will serve as a steppingstone for the Theoretical Framework of this thesis, while the ASVA study will be the groundwork. The reason for this is quite straightforward as the ASVA study is institution-focussed instead of nation-wide, and its research objectives closely resemble those of this dissertation. This will make it easier to apply their compatible theories, questions, and answers to the work in this dissertation as it requires less steps to convert it into a usable framework. The third study, conducted by *Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg* (Intercity Student Consultation) (ISO), is a compilation of sorts that combines 18 reports from different institutions from different years. Choosing their report was a conscious decision as it is arguably the best report that summarizes the data at hand while simultaneously showing emerging trends over the past decade. The information of the abovementioned reports will be presented in the following manner:

- A short description of the report.
- A summary of the methodology.
- A short but detailed summary of the results.

In the following section, the sub-questions ‘*what is stress?*’ and ‘*what is student stress?*’ will be answered accordingly. The first question will provide a clear description of stress and its consequences, while the latter will explain the different manifestations of stress amongst students based on the information found in the aforementioned studies. This will be further supported by the four main factors of student stress, which will be decided by analysing the information at hand from the second sub-question, followed by a concluding overview of the key findings of this section.

2.1 What is stress?

The concept and definition of stress is regularly subject to change. In an article written by Susan Michie, she mentions that earlier definitions described stress as “the pressure of the environment” and “the strain within a person”, both logical explanations and arguably something that the majority of people can relate to, with the word *strain* functioning as a key term as it recurs in most definitions (Michie, 2002). However, the first definition that was considered generic was that of Hans Selye during the 1920's, who described stress as a “nonspecific response of the body to any demand”. Originally naming it the ‘General Adaptation Syndrome’, Selye explained how stress produces different symptoms both mentally and physically depending on the surrounding factors of a person (Kshirsagar & Seema, 2016).

Over the past two to three decades, the concept of stress has become more of an umbrella term rather than merely one specific idea, as stress in its ‘tangible and intangible’ form differs per person and per situation. Moreover, around the turn of the new century, stress was deemed the “Health Epidemic of the 21st Century” by the World Health Organisation. This was mainly due to the 20% increase in stress levels among Americans between 1983 and 2009 and the annual \$300 billion it would cost American businesses to cope with said issue (Fink, 2016). It could be argued that the constant discussion about its definition proves that stress remains a somewhat elusive topic, meaning does humanity really grasp what it is and is it something that can be prevented.

Every human being will have to deal with stress at some point in their lives, while some might experience it on a daily basis, others only come face-to-face with it on certain occasions because they might be able to control it more effectively. Stress usually becomes apparent when a person feels like he or she loses control of a situation they are currently in. More specifically, situations that are unpredictable and uncontrollable, uncertain, vague, or unfamiliar, or involving conflict, loss or performance expectations are key in causing a person to feel ‘stressed’ (Michie, 2002).

The resulting effects of stress vary depending on the amount of time and intensity to which a person is exposed to it. For example, if it is short-term or acute stress the consequences might be less severe as opposed to long-term or persistent stress. Acute stress could negatively affect the feelings, behaviour, thinking and physicality of a person. Take less serious consequences such as fatigue and irritability as an example. Unfortunately, severer complications such as mental illnesses (e.g., anxiety and depression) could develop over time if no sufficient action is undertaken. Persistent stress on the other hand could cause fundamental damage not only to the mental state of a person, but also to their physical state as heart disease could be a long-term effect (Kshirsagar & Seema, 2016).

2.2 What is student stress?

Three previously conducted studies by Dutch (student) organisations will be used as examples in order to examine how this information is applicable to students. A short description for each study and its key findings will be provided below. A description of the organisation can be found in *Appendix A* on page 50.

The first study was conducted by *Landelijke Studenten Vakbond* (National Student Union) (LSVb) in 2013. The Theoretical Framework of the report mentions four main categories that have been considered as factors that heavily influence the psychological state of a student. These categories are based on the conceptual model developed by Ross, Niebling and Hecker who described these categories as the direct causes of psychological complaints among students (Ross, Niebling, & Hecker, 1999). The first category is *interpersonal factors*, and this takes the relationships of the student (including their potential membership of a student association) and extra activities next to their academics into account. The second category is *intra-personal*, which includes the current academic year, gender, and the age of a student. The third category, *academic*, is concerned with study regimes (binding study advice) and student counselling. The fourth and final category includes financial insecurity, negative feedback, and loneliness, and is summarized into one concept; *surroundings* (Schmidt & Simons, 2013).

The quantitative method of acquiring information was through an explorative survey that would provide more insight on psychological complaints among students. The survey is divided into two parts; the first part includes an extensive list of questions aimed to research the factors that influence the psychological wellbeing of a student and whether students have experienced said issues or not. The second part consists out of questions that derive from the Utrechtse Burnout Scale (UBOS), which is a scientifically verified scale that can confirm if an individual is suffering from a burnout (Vanheule, Rosseel, Vlerick, Van de Ven, & Declercq, 2012). However, due to the availability of verified surveys for this specific topic, LSVb made the conscious decision to discuss this in a separate report. The analysis for this part was conducted at a later stage. In order to create the theoretical foundation for the questionnaire, several individuals were interviewed that have experience in working with the psychological wellbeing of students on a daily basis. This includes deans, study advisors and student psychologists. While the survey offered a broad scope of the current situation, the interviews allowed LSVb to focus on any underlying correlations or mechanisms that might amplify the problem at hand. After analysing the data, a total of 1113 usable cases were left. An approximate 49% of the respondents admitted to experiencing or having experienced psychological complaints, with hbo-

students forming the largest group – ‘hbo’ stands for *hoger beroepsonderwijs*, which is the university of applied sciences level of education in The Netherlands. Nonetheless, according to LSVb, the differences in gender and level of education were fairly minimal. It could be argued that this makes the category *intra-personal* irrelevant, which is demonstrated by the fact that it was the least significant cause of psychological complaints among students according to the study. Of the 25 forms of mental health conditions mentioned in the report, the eight most prominent complaints, in decreasing order, include depression (both clinical as non-clinical), exhaustion, stress, anxiety, performance anxiety, concentration, burnout and demotivation. Noteworthy are the first three complaints (depression, exhaustion, and stress) forming a vast majority compared to the other possible options. For example, 93 students reported stress as their primary complaint, while number four on the list, anxiety, is a little over half the amount with a total of 47. According to the respondents, the primary sources of experiencing stress and other complaints are mainly due to increasing academic pressure, performance anxiety, governmental pressure (of graduating as soon as possible), high pressure from the programme, financial insecurity, and the pressure of partaking in additional activities (Schmidt & Simons, 2013).

The second study was conducted by Darren Sierhuis for *ASVA Onderzoeksbureau* (ASVA Bureau for Investigation) (ASVA) in 2018 and it is a direct response to the 2013 report released by LSVb. The Theoretical Framework for this research was an extensive questionnaire written by Gadzella, Masten and Stacks (1998) and the goal of this questionnaire was to research stressors that influence the psychological wellbeing of students. Academic pressure, financial pressure, time pressure, health issues and behavioural characteristics are defined as key stressors in this report (Gadzella, Masten, & Stacks, 1998). The research conducted by LSVb has been used as the basis for the ASVA report, because the stressors found in that study fit into the framework set by Gadzella, Masten and Stacks. Similar to LSVb, the primary method of research was a questionnaire that was provided to students at the *Hogeschool van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences) (HvA) and the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* (University of Amsterdam) (UvA). The questions on the questionnaire consisted of several yes-or-no questions, statements that had to be rated on a five-point Likert-scale and some open questions. A Likert-scale is a rating system often used in questionnaires with the intent to measure the opinions, attitudes, or perceptions of respondents. The respondent must rate the statement provided to them by scoring it with a number (often) from one to five (Jamieson, 2017). According to ASVA, the response was not as high as anticipated, however, it still resulted in a sufficient number of usable cases. ASVA argues this could have been due to the topic being quite personal,

hence the reason it might have discouraged students rather than attract them. Nonetheless, the study resulted in 181 usable cases, of which 71% was female and the average age was 23. From the total amount of respondents, 75% admitted to experiencing psychological complaints. It should be noted that this number could be an unrealistic representation, due to the possibility of the survey only attracting students who identify with the topic. Some of the key findings include that, similar to the LSVb study, exhaustion, anxiety, and depression are the most common mental health issues, negatively impacting the life of students. Academics remain as the primary source of stress. More specifically, external pressure is the main stressor students experience, which is manifested through the seemingly endless flow of assignments, exams, and presentations. Additionally, students feel the pressure of graduating within a certain time period due to societal standards. This is derivative from the expectancy of graduating without delay which, in turn, is due to the replacement of the financial aid system by the loan system, on which will be further elaborated in the next section. This simultaneously functions as the main reason why financial pressure is the second most prominent source of stress among students. The third source, additional activities, appears to carry a larger impact on mental health than initially thought. According to the research, students who participate in extra activities, especially student associations, could be vulnerable to experiencing psychological complaints. Moreover, these additional activities are considered to be important experiences on a resume; hence the reason students still choose to partake in such activities which could add pressure on students to perform better. Finally, interpersonal situations and behavioural characteristics show no sign of having a significant effect on the mental wellbeing of students. For example, the pressure of achieving the best academic results as possible (a measurement for behavioural characteristics) is nullified by the academic pressure students feel from external influences. This is surprising considering the literature used for this research does count this factor as one of the most prominent stressors along with the aforementioned stressors (Sierhuis, 2018).

The third and final study was conducted by *Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg* (Intercity Student Consultation) (ISO) and is a direct response to the national government who promised to conduct a research in student wellbeing but would not take any action until the results were obtained and processed by the end of 2021. ISO was disappointed in this statement and decided to conduct their own research to show what the current situation is. With an increase in burnout related complaints, ISO believed taking action was necessary.

This report is different from the reports mentioned before, as it is a compilation of sorts of studies conducted by other institutions in the past five years. In order to obtain the needed data, the reports that have been used for this study had to meet the following criteria:

1. The respondents of the report must be registered at an institution for higher education. This includes both hbo and wo, and bachelor and master studies.
2. The students must be registered at a Dutch institution but are not required to be of Dutch nationality.
3. The reports must be recently released, meaning no reports older than five years. Reports older than 2014 were not considered viable for this study.
4. The studies must be trustworthy and must be either conducted or supervised by research institutions.
5. In case of repeated studies, only the most recent one will be used.

Further analysis was based on a total of 18 reports with an accumulated 52.956 respondents. Five of these reports were focussed solely on hbo-students, five on wo-students and eight reports included both hbo and wo-students – ‘wo’ stands for *wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, which is the university level of education in The Netherlands. The results section of the report has an interesting introduction that will be taken into account for this dissertation when necessary. It states in the first sentence that pressure and stress are often incorrectly intermingled or used synonymously despite the concepts carrying two completely different definitions. They are, however, related in some fashion as pressure could be seen as the action and stress as the possible reaction. A conceptual model in the report explains the three categories into which pressure could be divided; the first being societal context, the second social surroundings and the third the individual. With societal pressure forming the outer circle and individual or personal pressure the inner circle.

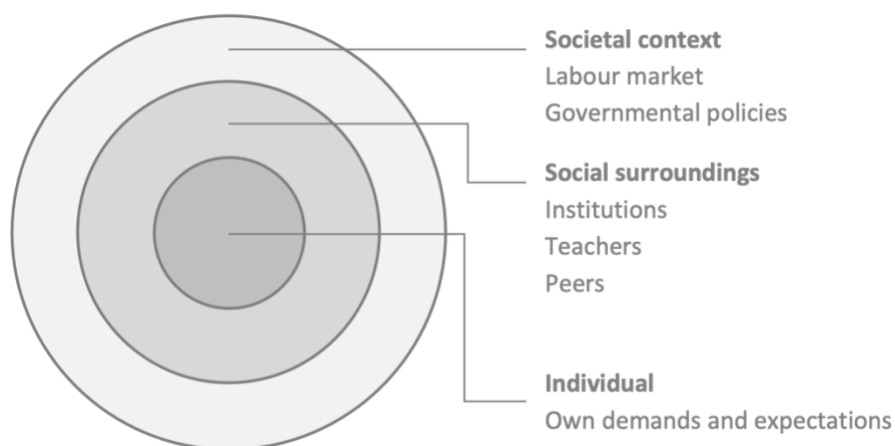


Figure 2.1: Based on/Translated version of the conceptual model shown in the ISO report (Litjens & Ruijbrok, 2019).

In the case of pressure converting into stress, the influence that stress has differs per person, but as ISO describes it, stress can be healthy in some forms. Stress can increase alertness and energy levels, and it can help people finish tasks they might have been postponing. Nevertheless, too much stress is harmful for any individual as it can cause exhaustion and a loss of focus among many other things. In summary, if pressure can be maintained, excessive stress can be prevented. Therefore, it is no surprise that ISO is worried about the current situation of student wellbeing when 70,69% of the respondents claim to be experiencing large amounts of pressure.

Further key findings include information in regard to unhealthy stress, development of the situation and psychological complaints. Results show that more than half of the respondents experience unhealthy amounts of stress, with students admitting to it hindering their day-to-day functioning. In addition, 52,98% of the respondents is suffering from early signs of a burnout, experiencing complaints such as emotional exhaustion or social distancing. Besides, out of this 52,98%, statistics show that 15,39% is at serious risk of an actual burnout. A point the ISO report raises is that a burnout is almost always a result of persistent stress, which is not a shared trait when discussing the causes of other psychological complaints such as depression or anxiety. While stress plays an important part in this, it usually is caused by external factors. However, a combination of the two is very probable, due to the added pressure or stress students face during their academic years. This means the mental ailments that students suffer from, such as a lack of concentration (31,43%), performance anxiety (22,78%) and depression (9,18%) are not just caused by stress but are also very likely to be linked to other factors or events in the life of a student. In their report, ISO also mentioned that 8,47% of students claim to experience suicidal thoughts or behaviour. This means that of the total 52.956 respondents approximately 8.100 of them are at risk of committing suicide. It is important to take into account that this is most likely caused by other external factors that have no connection to academics or other aforementioned stressors, however, it is still important that universities and other institutions provide help to the students that need it.

According to ISO, it is difficult to create an accurate image of the situation from a societal aspect due to the difference in years of the studies being conducted. In order to create the foundation of the report, ISO had to rely on the 2012 report called '*De Grote Studiedrukenquête*'; a survey that researched the academic pressure that students experience. This study used a similar structure as the one performed by ISO, as it was conducted at 15 separate higher education institutions with a total of 5.497 respondents. In 2012, this study reported that 39% of its respondents experience high amounts of stress, which is an increase of approximately 15% when compared to the 54,26% reported by ISO (Litjens & Ruijbrok, 2019).

After comparing the three studies, it could be concluded that there are four prominent factors when it comes to connecting stress to the 'student lifestyle'. These include academic pressure, financial pressure, additional activities, and interpersonal factors. Academic and financial pressure are the two leading factors in this scenario, as LSVb and ASVA both emphasize the influence these stressors have on students. Moreover, both institutions base these factors on conceptual models created by older studies of Ross, Niebling and Hacker, and Gadzella, Masten and Stacks. Using additional activities as a factor is mostly due to the results of the ASVA report. In their result section, it is stated that the effect additional activities have on the mental wellbeing of a student is more significant than previously anticipated. Thus, to see if this is the case at the European Studies programme, it will be used as one of the leading factors in this dissertation. Lastly, interpersonal factors is another stressor that seems prominent due to the influence events might have had on the personal development of students that occurred during their upbringing or past. Relationships to other people and family situations or a history of psychological complaints will be important information to determine whether this factor is influential or not. Therefore, these four factors, and possible sub-related topics, will be further discussed. Additionally, the study conducted by ASVA will be used as the guideline for this research due to the similarities with the research objectives.

2.3 What are the main factors of student stress?

Academic pressure

According to LSVb, academic pressure is one of the leading causes of stress-related complaints among students. Stress is predominantly caused by the demands and expectations set by universities. This could be counteracted, however, if next to these demands sufficient guidance is offered to students; a 2011 report by LSVb shows that a lack of sufficient guidance is a crucial factor in whether a student might be delayed during their academic years. This information is further confirmed by a study conducted by Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (Schmidt & Simons, 2013). Moreover, according to the ISO report, 67,64% of the students admit to experiencing psychological complaints during their studies, with 41% of these students agreeing that these expectations are the main source of pressure, rating the pressure high to very high (Litjens & Ruijbrok, 2019). Besides the demands set by the institutions, the pressure to graduate within a set amount of time is becoming more of a weighing factor each year. According to Darren Sierhuis (ASVA), this is mainly due to the replacement of the study grant system by the loan system. This provides students with an additional reason to feel the pressure of graduating as soon as possible, with the intent of minimizing the costs of education (Sierhuis, 2018).

Financial pressure

As mentioned before, the replacement of the study grant system, in which students received a set amount of financial aid from the government, by the loan system added pressure to students and increased the chances of experiencing psychological complaints by 71%. The old system allowed students to apply for a study grant which was based on their living conditions (i.e., with parents or own residence). Besides this grant, students could apply for an additional grant, a loan, and a partial compensation for tuition fees. If a student were to graduate within 10 years, the basis grant is considered a gift instead of a loan. However, the new system only allows students to apply for a maximum loan of approximately 1.027 euros a month, eliminating the grant altogether (DUO, 2020). According to ASVA researcher Darren Sierhuis, 78% of the respondents to their questionnaire claimed to be working besides their studies in order to adequately compensate the costs of living. The approximate work week of these students consists of 13 hours, however, many respondents claimed to have stopped working after one or two years because it would negatively consume their time and energy. This results in students being forced to take out the student loan to cover the costs of living, with 19% of the respondents claiming they struggle to make ends meet. The problem that arises from this has been mentioned in a previous section, which is the amount of pressure the loan system causes students to experience to graduate within a certain amount of time to prevent debt from increasing too significantly. Arguing that students should return to their parental home is not a feasible solution, simply because the distance between home and university is too far in the majority of the cases (Sierhuis, 2018).

Additional activities

It was fairly common that students were occupied with activities besides their academics. Some examples of such activities include sports, student organizations and voluntary work. However, activities next to studying is becoming less common as multiple news sources record a decrease in students participating in said activities simply because the Dutch student is *'too busy'*. In 2005, the average student spent over 600 hours on additional activities during their studies, almost triple the amount of a student in 2013, who was said to spend around 200 hours on side-activities (LKvV, 2019). Nonetheless, in 2018 the average student spent 22 hours a week on side-activities according to 49% of the respondents of the ASVA study. The majority of this group are members of student associations, either being members of the board or the commission. There is a distinction between board members and commission members, however, as tasks that are commission-related take up to approximately 11 hours a week, while board-related tasks consume around 25 hours a week. What makes this

interesting is that members who are part of the commission claim that this does interfere with their academics more often compared to board members, despite the 14-hour difference. Nevertheless, 26% of all respondents admitted to side-activities being a distraction from academics, both positively and negatively (Sierhuis, 2018). A student association is a useful example for why side-activities can have both a positive and negative influence on the stress levels of a student and their academics, as it brings certain social expectations (e.g., attending parties, regular drinking) while simultaneously serving as a social buffer which is vital for the mental wellbeing of a person (Schmidt & Simons, 2013).

Interpersonal factors

In the 2013 study conducted by LSVb, 169 of the 1110 respondents claimed that the root of their psychological complaints stem from interpersonal factors, for example family-related issues, childhood, and external stressors, with the first forming the largest group with 78 respondents (Schmidt & Simons, 2013). ASVA elaborates further on this topic in their research, stating that family-related issues could be a direct cause of psychological complaints, especially when combined with the stress of academics. In this study, 41% of the respondents have experienced said issues and claim it has negatively impacted their academic performance, with 81% of this group describing the impact as negative to very negative. Moreover, 83% of the respondents who have dealt with family-related issues have admitted to experiencing one or more psychological complaints over the course of their studies (Sierhuis, 2018).

Offering solutions

The three previously conducted studies that were used for the research of this dissertation discussed a variety of different causes and solutions for dealing with stress. Despite the six-year gap between the studies, there are some causes that sustained this gap and that are mentioned in all three reports. These include financial insecurity, a lack of sufficient guidance, and the pressure deriving from the standards set by universities.

The LSVb report stresses that educational institutions should research the wellbeing of their own students and to take action where action is needed. This study heavily emphasizes the financial insecurity and lack of sufficient guidance as the main causes of psychological complaints among students. Addressing this topic and opening it up for discussion is crucial because if people feel comfortable enough to openly address their (mental) wellbeing, it should become easier to tackle the issue in an early stage. To stress it once more, offering sufficient guidance is a vital step in this process

as student counsellors can offer help or redirect a student to an external institution when needed (Schmidt & Simons, 2013).

Moreover, ASVA further argues that the stress that students experience during their academics also seem to be symptoms of other problems, namely the increasing pressure of graduating without study delay, the increasing competition on the labour market and the increased financial insecurity after the implementation of the loan system. Therefore, the ASVA study urges the government to act on said issues; it is considered that the reduction of credits that a student needs to obtain in their propaedeutic phase is not enough to actively combat the problem at hand. In 2018, the solution of reducing the credits from 60 to 40 was proposed by the Minister of Education Van Engelshoven, and the goal was to implement it before the end of 2020. This still was not implemented in 2021. Both LSVb and ISO have deemed this proposal to be a step into the right direction but do believe more significant steps need to be taken (NOS, 2018). A change in financial structuring is required and universities should focus less on making sure students graduate as soon as possible and more on relieving the pressure students feel due to the current situation they are in. Appropriately put by ASVA, academic achievements should not be depending on financial resources. One of the two key objectives that are discussed in order to alleviate students from stress in the report is the possibility of focussing on side-activities in exchange for credits. This gives students the opportunity to obtain relevant working experience, mainly to build up their resume, and to decrease the stress of competing on the labour market. The other objective is to address the marginal compensation students receive for internships. Unfortunately, it is too common for students to receive a compensation of 100 to 200 euros a month for a fulltime job, which barely covers the costs of living in cities such as Amsterdam. Changing this could make a sizable difference for students and their financial situation (Sierhuis, 2018).

Figure 2.2 provides a summarized overview of the information discussed in the Theoretical Framework. From left to right, the table is compiled of the four main stressors, followed by their main causes, and the solutions provided by the studies discussed. This information, especially the solutions, will be vital when writing a recommendation for the ES-programme if the questionnaire demonstrates that there is room for improvement. For example, the solutions given in the table below, could be used and tailored to the needs of the ES students. An extended version of this operationalization table, including links between the problems and questions from the interviews, can be found in *Appendix B* on page 51 and 52.

Factor	Problem	Solution
Academic pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sufficient guidance. • High demands and expectations set by universities. • Seemingly endless flow of assignments, exams, and presentations. • Pressure to graduate without delay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities responsible for analysing student wellbeing. • Provide sufficient guidance/counselling. • Addressing mental health as a topic for open discussion to encourage students to talk about it with staff or peers. • Abolish credit system; students no longer need to acquire a minimum amount of credits to continue.
Financial pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the loan system; pressure to graduate without delay. • Working next to studies takes up too much time; necessary to cover costs of living. • Marginal compensation for internships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relieving students of pressure to graduate without delay; change the financial structure. • Ensure students receive sufficient compensation for internships; universities could act as a mediator.
Additional activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional activities cost too much time. • No academic or financial compensation except for a 'nice addition to a resume'. • Students feel they need it to compete in the labour market; results in added pressure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensate students for participating in additional activities; earn credits for doing voluntary work for example. • Assist students in building up their resume; reduce stress/anxiety for competing on the labour market.
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family issues pose a threat for the mental wellbeing of students. • No active or sufficient help from institutions to deal with such issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing mental health as a topic for open discussion to encourage students to talk about it with family, friends, or peers.

Figure 2.2: Operationalization table featuring the key problems and solutions of the theoretical framework.

3. Methodology

In order to provide an adequate answer to the central research question '*how can the European Studies programme at The Hague University of Applied Sciences reduce stress level among its students?*', corresponding sub questions were established. This should provide the reader with a clear overview of the problem at hand. The purpose of the first sub question '*what is stress?*' is to create an informative foundation for the second sub question. In the previous chapter, the Theoretical Framework, the objective was to answer this question and to gather information on what stress is in the theoretical sense, but also in practicality, meaning how it actually influences students. To answer the second sub question '*what is the current situation at European Studies within The Hague University of Applied Sciences?*', a questionnaire was created which then was completed by the students of this programme and two interviews were conducted with two THUAS employees. The questions of the questionnaire were based on the information researched in the first sub question. The reason for doing this was to create a streamlined questionnaire which gives the respondent a clear list of options, while simultaneously simplifying the process of analysing the answers.

Based on the results of the Theoretical Framework, the four main factors of student stress became apparent and one of the studies had a questionnaire that covered the majority of these results. Therefore, these questions were translated and tailored to fit the profile of European Studies students more accurately. Needless to mention, an extra option was provided if none of the provided answers were applicable to the respondent. The questions of the interview were based on information that is either not obtainable through the questionnaire or did not become apparent through the questionnaire.

In order to answer the first sub question, several supporting topics and/or questions were established. These will be described and further explained down below.

- What are the causes of stress among students?
- What are the symptoms and characteristics of stress (among students)?
- What measures are taken to reduce stress among students?

Similar to the first sub question, the second sub question has supporting questions to help formulating an adequate answer:

- What causes stress among the students of European Studies?
- How much stress do students experience during their studies?
- Do students of this programme experience as much stress as other students from different Dutch institutions?
- What measures are taken to reduce stress among ES students?

Each of these questions have been answered through the results of the questionnaire - except the last one which was answered through the interview. The answers were compared to the theoretical information gained from the first sub question to see whether the causes, symptoms, and amount of stress is similar to other people and/or students. Based on this, a fitting recommendation was developed for the European Studies programme at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

3.1 Qualitative data collection

For the first sub question, and its set of supporting questions from the Theoretical Framework, desk research was used as primary research tool. In order to answer the questions that were directly related to students and the effects of stress, the studies of LSVb, ASVA and ISO were used. The criteria for choosing these studies are as follows:

- The research objectives must align to the larger extent with the objectives of this dissertation.
- The research must be trustworthy, meaning it was conducted or supervised by educational institutions (e.g., universities, student-representation organisations).
- The research may not be older than ten years.
- Multiple reports have to be used from different years to provide an indication of possible trends.

Based on these criteria, the three studies that were chosen were conducted by organizations that are either connected to educational institutions or primarily composed of students as a part of a representative organisation and are conducted in separate years to show potential trends. To further elaborate on why these reports were chosen, the key motives of choosing these studies were due to their exclusive focus on students and their mental wellbeing. For example, the ASVA study is focussed on the educational institutions HvA and UvA, which aligns with the target demographic of this dissertation. Moreover, as all of these reports are written and researched by Dutch institutions, the information gathered should be relevant to this research as these reports had to take into account similar situations and regulations that the average student in The Netherlands experiences. The goal is to create a list of causes which can later be used for the questions in the questionnaire, which will be filled in by students of said programme. Besides the three chosen reports of LSVb, ASVA and ISO used for answering the questions related to student stress, other academic journal articles and papers were used to gain a better understanding of what stress is in the theoretical sense. These sources were chosen based on the following criteria:

- The studies had to be written by credible researchers – not in terms of renown but in terms of expertise in the field (preferably with articles published in journals or published by research institutions).
- The information should be quite recent – or an appropriate balance between older and newer research should exist to provide an overview of trends and changes.
- Finally, the papers independently should be able to answer the main research question to the larger extent – the information should be directly applicable and not ‘altered’ to fit the narrative of this dissertation.

In order to answer the second sub question, the used research methods were split up into two separate forms, as both quantitative and qualitative data collection could be used. Qualitative data collection was done through two interviews as devising an effective solution for reducing stress among students, research into whether or not the European Studies programme currently has measurements implemented for this specific issue was needed. This information was obtained by an interview with two THUAS staff members; Dave van Ginhoven and Fee Romein.

Van Ginhoven is a senior lecturer, community manager and public relations Person in Charge (PIC), and a well-known figure within European Studies. He commonly is considered to be the first point of contact for European Studies students. Furthermore, he is familiar with the specifics of the study programme. For this reason, he seemed to be a viable interviewee for both an inside view on the matter but also to obtain knowledge on practical ‘behind-the-scenes’ information that might be harder to acquire if not granted the access. These matters include what kind of support ES offers to students, initiatives that exist, credit systems, student-teacher relations, and demands and expectations from within ES.

Fee Romein is an *Onderwijs, Kennis and Communicatie* (Education, Knowledge and Communication) (OKC) policy officer for student wellbeing and social security at THUAS. To gain an accurate understanding of the current situation at THUAS, information such as the existence of annual student surveys, mental health support channels, and other present or missing measures that might help or be needed was required. Accordingly, Fee Romein was in the position to help answer these pending questions.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to answer the questions that needed to be answered, but also to leave room for conversation and the possibility of addressing other relevant topics. The length of the interviews was determined on whether the required information was collected. However, the aim was to maintain a length of at least 30 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes to

guarantee obtaining sufficient information but to simultaneously prevent an excess of unnecessary information. Due to the national lockdown and governmental regulations in regard to the coronavirus crisis, the interviews were not held in person and were instead conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams. During the interview, consent for recording and the usage of information has been requested as well as through a form sent to the participants afterwards. The interview questions can be found in the *Operationalization Table in Appendix B on page 51 and 52*.

3.2 Quantitative data collection

The aim was to obtain at least 100 responses. The amount is not particularly high, considering the total number of ES students is an approximate 3000. However, it seemed a reasonable target when comparing it to the LSVb and ASVA studies, who obtained 1113 (Schmidt & Simons, 2013) and 181 (Sierhuis, 2018) respondents over a potential research population of 663.000 (CBS, 2020) and 81.000 (HvA, 2020) (UvA, 2020) respectively – both including hbo- and wo-students. The first research population number is based on the total number of registered students in the Netherlands for the academic year 2012-2013 (due to LSVb focussing its research nationwide this could be their potential research population) while the latter is the approximate sum of HvA and UvA students, based on the available statistics. These numbers could conclude that students are a difficult target demographic in terms of surveying, thus, to keep expectations realistic, a minimum of 100 respondents on a research population of approximately 3000 students seemed feasible. The students received the invitation by email or through the support network for European Studies students on the social media platform Facebook to complete the questionnaire on Google Forms. The reason for choosing Google Forms was due to the possibility to export the data in a Microsoft Excel sheet, which was used to analyse the data. The questions on the questionnaire were stated in a first-person format which allows the respondent to identify with the statement.

- Example: *'I feel like THUAS is not offering sufficient guidance'* instead of *'THUAS is not offering sufficient guidance'*.

By formulating the statements as such, respondents might be more objective, and the statement would not read as an 'attack' or overall negative. The questionnaire counted 47 questions, consisting of Likert scale questions, open answer questions and multiple-choice questions. When all the necessary data was collected, the results were processed and analysed in Excel. This has provided the possibility of creating a data matrix, accurately filtering usable data, group repeated (open) answers, creating a detailed analysis and cross-examining data (i.e., correlation between age and experienced

psychological complaints) freely without restrictions. The questionnaire can be found in *Appendix C* on *page 53*.

4. Results

The following chapter provides the results of the questionnaire completed by the students of the ES-programme and the interviews conducted with two THUAS staff members. Information will be shared in the order of the questionnaire with emphasis on the four factors of student stress that were mentioned and explained in the Theoretical Framework chapter. The information obtained from the interview will be applied where suited and will be further discussed in its own sub section at the end of the chapter. A total of 109 students have participated in the survey, which means the goal of obtaining at least 100 usable respondents was met.

4.1 Questionnaire

Identification

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of demographical questions and informative questions regarding their academics. The average age of the respondents was approximately 22 years old and predominantly female with a majority of 62%. The other three options *male*, *non-binary*, and *prefer not to disclose* got 31%, 4% and 3% respectively. Most of the respondents were of Dutch nationality (72%), followed by German (6%), and Bulgarian and Spanish shared the same amount of responses (3%). Figure 4.1 shows the results to the question 'What academic year are you in?'.

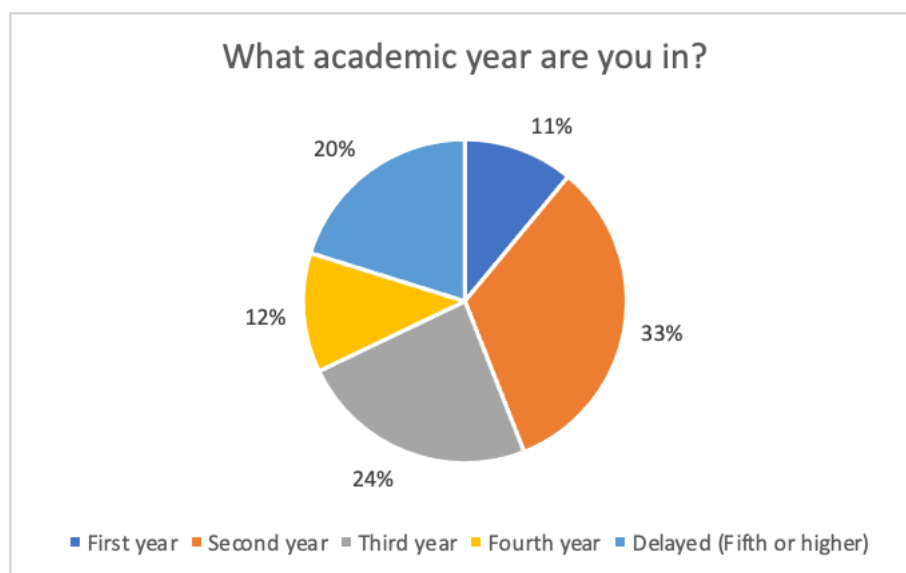


Figure 4.1: Results to the survey question 'What academic year are you in?'.

When asked if this was the first time enrolled in a study programme, the results were fairly close to one another, with 60% opting for *yes* against 40% who chose *no*. When asked the same question but

whether this was at a Dutch institution, the difference was much larger, resulting in a division of 89% opting *yes* against 11% who chose *no*.

Psychological information

The vast majority of respondents claimed to having experienced psychological complaints during their studies, with a total of 87% to 13% who did not. The next question '*What complaints have you experienced?*' was a multiple-choice question, thus, instead of percentages, the results will be shared in counts. With a total of 72, *anxiety* was the most common complaint among students, followed by *exhaustion* (69), *(severe) lack of concentration* (68), *(severe) demotivation* (66) and *performance anxiety* (62). Figure 4.2 below shows the remaining results. Of these respondents, 60% claimed this influenced their studies *quite a lot* to *a lot*, and 53% sought help from either (medical) experts or from people close to them. Finally, the last question of this section '*Who did you ask for help?*' was another multiple-choice question, meaning, instead of percentages these results will be shared in counts as well. The on-campus psychologist/counsellor was visited by 18 students according to the survey, 25 sought help off-campus, and 58 and 60 respondents confided in family and/or friends respectively. Among the open answers under the option *other*, one of the respondents reported to suffer physical pains due to high levels of stress. Suffering from locked hips, the student was forced to walk with a cane during the summer of 2020. This caused the student to seek help from not only mental experts but also from a physiotherapist.

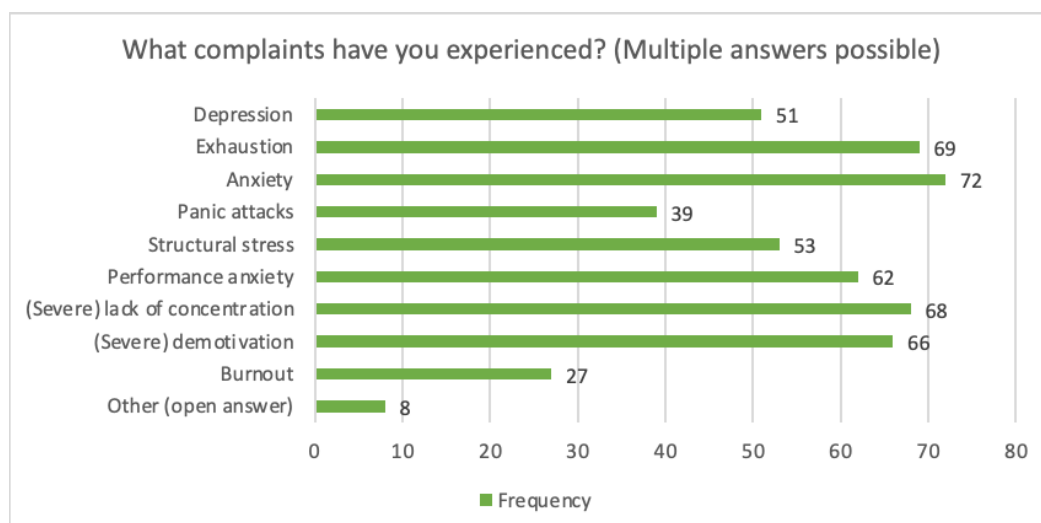


Figure 4.2: Results of the survey question 'What complaints have you experienced?'.

Academic pressure

The questions of the *academic pressure* section were all formulated as statements and respondents were asked to rate these according to the five-point Likert-scale format. The questions were asked to research if the respondents of this survey undergo similar amounts of pressure as the respondents of the surveys used in the Theoretical Framework. The first question asked the respondents to what extent they felt pressure to perform well academically on a daily basis, and a majority of 39% *agreed* they felt pressure. Followed by 26% that *strongly agreed* to feeling pressure, 23% chose *neutral*, and the other 12% (*strongly*) *disagreed*. The second question measured whether students felt anxious they might not achieve their academic objectives, to which the vast majority *strongly agreed* (40%). The option *agree* amounted to 23% while *neutral* scored a bit higher with 28%. Again, *disagree* and *strongly disagree* followed with the lowest percentages of 5% and 4% respectively. The third question, '*I often worry I will not perform well on tests/exams*', showed a fairly similar top three, starting with *strongly agree* (40%), followed by *agree* (30%) and *neutral* (28%), leaving *disagree* (8%) and *strongly disagree* (2%) as the bottom two options. The next two questions '*I often worry I am not able to finish my assignments in time*' and '*I often worry I do not have enough time to study for my exams*' both saw significant increases in respondents choosing the option *disagree*, with the first question scoring 14% and the latter 17%. To the first question, the majority *agreed* to the worry of not being able to finish assignments in time with 32%. The second question resulted in a draw between *neutral* and *disagree* at 17% and *agree* and *strongly agree* end in similar fashion with results of 32% and 31%. The sixth question, '*I am afraid I will not be able to finish my studies without delay*', the first four options showed similar percentages, ranging between 10% and 17%. Only *strongly agree* outnumbered the other option with a vast majority of 44%. The final question measuring whether ES students consider the guidance offered by the programme sufficient in terms of dealing with academic pressure, the results were reminiscent of the first few questions. The results were as follows; *strongly disagree* with 4%, *disagree* with 12%, *neutral* with 34%, *agree* with 22%, and *strongly agree* with 28%. This was the first majority that optioned for *neutral*.

Financial pressure

In this section students were asked a series of questions that relate to financial situations that could cause stress. These were based on the stress factors researched in the Theoretical Framework. This part of the questionnaire consisted out of Likert-scale questions, a multiple-choice question, and close-ended questions. The first two questions asked the respondents to inform whether they have experienced shortages in financial resources, and the stress it caused on both the person as well as

their ability to enjoy their student life, and if they have experienced financial pressure because of their financial obligations – books, tuition, rent, etc. With both questions the answers were fairly equal, particularly when compared to previous sections; the first question resulted in a majority that *disagreed* (29%) with the statement, followed by *strongly agreed* (24%). The latter question had similar results with the majority opting for *strongly disagree* (27%) followed by *strongly agree* (23%). The next series of questions were related to financial aiding and earning, meaning; do the students require loans or jobs in order to cover the costs of living. The majority of the respondents receive financial aid from the government with 70% – 27% was still part of the *old system* that provides partial aid and an optional loan, while the other 43% was part of the *new loan system* that abolished the gift from the government and replaced it with a full loan system. When asked whether the respondents had to take out a loan to finance their studies, the results were practically equal differing with a margin of only 1%. Most of the respondents received this loan from the organisation *Dienst Uitvoerend Onderwijs* (Office of Education) (DUO) (40%), while others either received financing through *family* (30%) or *work* (26). The other eight respondents chose the option *bank, other* or *preferred not to disclose*. The next question, ‘How much financial aid in the form of a loan do you require a month?’ showed varying results which can be found in Figure 4.3. When asked if the respondents worry about the loan they require to finance their studies, most *strongly disagreed* with the statement (26%), while the other majorities either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* (21% and 23%).

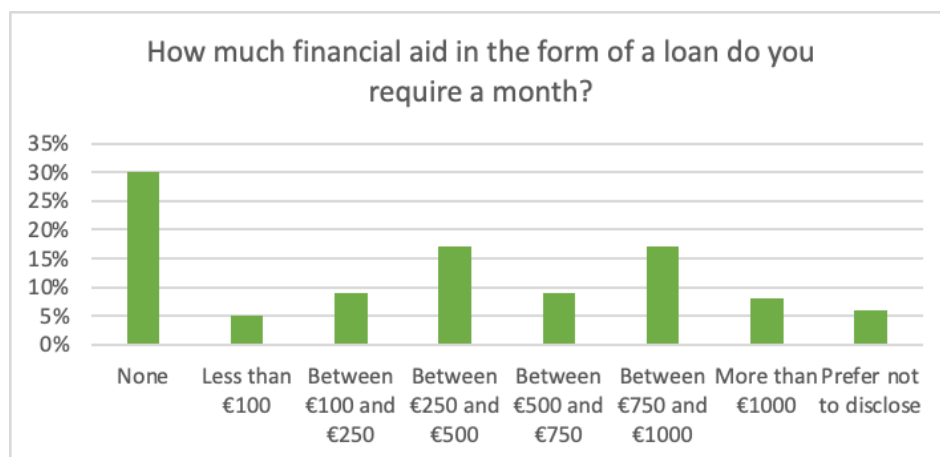


Figure 4.3: Results of the survey question ‘How much financial aid in the form of a loan do you require a month?’.

The students who participated in this questionnaire were asked about their jobs as well to get a clear overview of their workload and financial situation. The vast majority of 73% of the participants did have jobs next to their studies, opposed to the 27% that did not. The average student of this survey works an approximate eight to sixteen hours a week. When asked if this caused large amounts of stress, *neutral*, *agree* and *strongly agree* were the top three most chosen options with percentages of 28, 20 and 25 respectively.

The following questions were related to internships and whether students had either finished it, were in the process of doing so, or not to have started it at all. For the students who did not start yet at the time of taking this survey, the questions were optional, thus resulting in fewer respondents answering the questions. A total of 21% claimed to have either finished their internship or were doing their internship at the time of taking the survey. Of these respondents, 37% did not receive financial compensation against a 67% that did. The students were requested to specify the amount they received, and the amount ranged from zero euros to one respondent receiving 1050 euros a month, which resulted in an average financial compensation of 325,75 euros a month. Based on this, the students were asked to score the following statement: *'The financial compensation I received for doing my internship helped me cover the costs of living'* – to which 43% *strongly disagreed*, 17% *disagreed* or opted for *neutral*, 9% *agreed* and 13% *strongly agreed*.

Additional activities

In order to factor in the effects that additional activities have on the wellbeing of students who participated in this survey, five questions were added that took the participated activities, hours spent on these activities and whether this affected the students into consideration. The average amount of hours spent on additional activities is approximately six to eight hours per week. When asked what kind of activities students participated in the most common answers included student associations, personal exercise or team sports, clubs, hobbies, voluntary work, and activities hosted by or related to the ES programme. To measure the effects of these activities, two statements were provided to the respondents which they had to rate on a five-point Likert-scale. The first statement, *'I am afraid these activities might consume too much time, which I could spend on studying'*, saw a majority of 77% either feeling *neutral* or *(strongly) disagreeing* with the statement. The follow-up statement, in order to stir away from the connotation of additional activities only having negative side-effects on the wellbeing of a person, was *'I believe these activities positively help me with my day-to-day functioning, studies and overall wellbeing'*, and this resulted in a large increase in positive responses when compared to the previous statement. Again, 77% formed the majority, but at the other end of the scale. Still, 17% opted for *strongly disagree*.

Interpersonal factors

Interpersonal factors proved to be an invaluable factor in the Theoretical Framework when it comes to mental wellbeing, as this could have a significant effect on a person outside of their academic or financial situation. For this reason, three short questions were implemented to research if students

had personal situations during their studies, what these were, and to what extent it impacted their academic performance. The majority of students (67%) admitted to experiencing personal or family situations that negatively impacted their academics and student life. When asked if the respondents wanted to elaborate, multiple answers were given. Some experienced more personal difficulties due to mental health conditions such as ADHD, homesickness, anxiety disorder, burnout, and depression, while others experienced family related issues or traumas. These included deaths in family, uncomfortable situations at home, unexpected divorce, and illnesses. When asked if these situations had a large impact on studies and wellbeing, 31% *strongly agreed*, 22% either *agreed* or was *neutral*, 11% *disagreed* and 14% *strongly disagreed*.

Behavioural characteristics

This section was included with the intent to observe the behaviour of the respondents in terms of studying and motivations in and around academic performance. All questions were answered through rating statements on a five-point Likert-scale by choosing one of the provided options. As the questions and results do not require further elaboration, Figure 4.4 summarizes the results of this section.

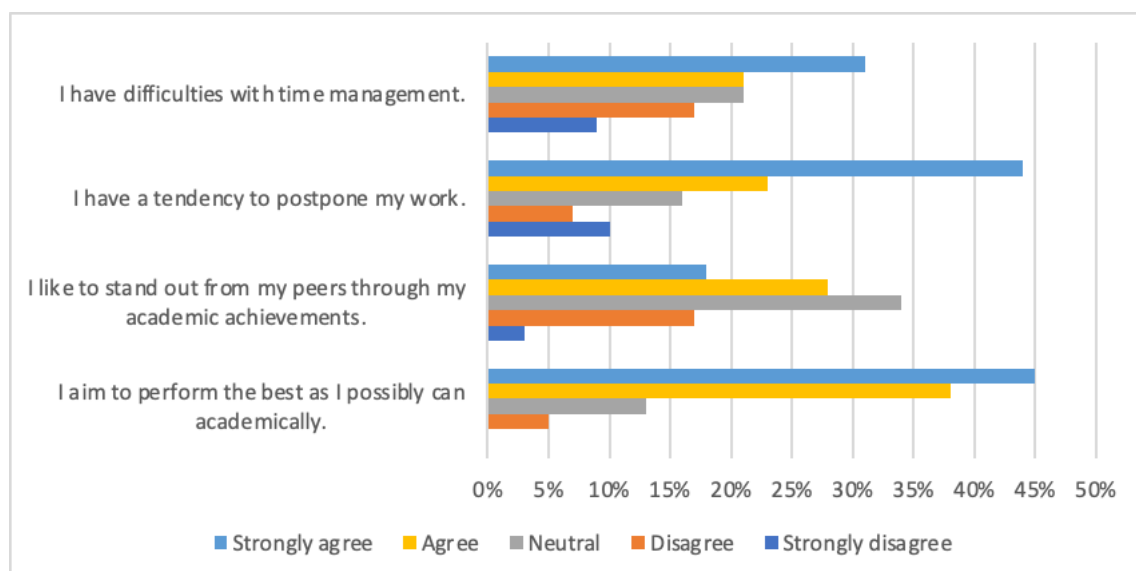


Figure 4.4: Results of the Behavioural Characteristics section of the survey.

Seeking help

The final section of the survey, 'Seeking help', was implemented to research whether students of the ES-programme at THUAS are comfortable with receiving help or guidance from staff members within the university or if they rather seek this off-campus. A total of 30% preferred to seek help from

THAUS/ES-programme personnel, especially when issues are related to academic performance, followed by 45% who will only require help if these issues only involve academic performance related issues, and the last 25% would not seek help from within the university. When asked from whom they would prefer to receive support, 38% opted for a *student psychologist*, 32% from a *student advisor* or *counsellor*, 5% chose *teachers*, 17% *off-campus* and 8% chose *other* – which included an open answer field. Among the open answers were the following given responses: peers, people to whom they are close to (e.g., friends and family), a family doctor and any available professional help.

The final question of the survey was an open answered question that gave respondents the opportunity to share any extra information they thought would be helpful. Answers applicable to this study will be considered in the next chapter, the Analysis.

4.2 Interviews

Qualitative data was obtained through two interviews held with Fee Romein and Dave van Ginhoven, both university employees. The full transcripts of the interviews can be found in *Appendix D and E* on pages 61-88 and 89-96 respectively. This section will only report on data directly applicable to the research of this dissertation. Topics of the interviews included current measurements and initiatives present at ES/THUAS that offer support to students – all considering mental wellbeing, offered (general) guidance to students, and demands and expectations from within the study programme.

Academic pressure

When asked about current plans of measuring student wellbeing, both interviewees stated that there are no present surveys – on either university or ES level – or ways of conducting this as the demand for it became increasingly prominent during the COVID crisis in 2020. Fee Romein noted that plans do exist. These plans include launching a study during the first year 100 Days survey, but then focussed on higher year students.

In terms of guidance and support, both Mr. Van Ginhoven and Ms. Romein stated that there are options within the programme and the university, besides Educational Careers Advisors (ECA) or counsellors, that could provide support to students. Furthermore, research conducted by the university pointed out that students value proactivity from teachers. The feeling of being heard improves their mental wellbeing, thus, check-in moments from teachers could be more regular Romein argues. However, a reason for students not being aware of all available support channels could be because of the complexity of the Student Portal and the intranet of THUAS, which was confirmed by both interviewees who speak from personal experiences. It is difficult to navigate, and

communication often gets lost due to this. According to Dave van Ginhoven, the ES programme also faces issues in terms of complexity, i.e., too many assignments, high number of modules, etc. The programme is working on this, however.

Another issue raised by both interviewees is mutual expectation management between teachers and students, and this possibly being a source of tension or misunderstanding between the two parties. Van Ginhoven mentioned that students might not realize how much work goes into preparing classes, especially virtual lectures. In order to create mutual understanding between teachers and students, there have been ideas of organising a *'walk in each other's shoes'* day to provide both ends with perspectives of what it is like to be a student and vice versa.

Financial pressure

According to Van Ginhoven, the old financial system that provided financial support to students was incredibly sensitive to fraud, thus, the change to a full loan system is in these terms a good change, despite it being a financial burden for students. Regarding demands and expectations set by the university, Dave van Ginhoven could only elaborate on the importance of graduating without delay. This is mainly due to the high costs the university faces whenever students are delayed. He explained that the tuition fee that students pay does not cover all costs, and the government supposedly pays for the rest. Nonetheless, this might not be an expectation that is commonly known amongst students.

Additional activities

This factor was a main focus in the questionnaire and has no further application to the interviewees. However, due to the point of additional activities not earning students financial or academic compensation, which has the possibility of providing students with working experience, internships were a topic of conversation in one of the interviews. There has been a colleague of Van Ginhoven who advocated for more internships, which could provide students with the opportunity of gaining more working experience before graduating and competing on the labour market. Nonetheless, no further steps have been taken to implement this.

Interpersonal

According to Fee Romein the university is understaffed in terms of available student psychologists, due to the disproportionate ratio of psychologists to students. A solution is to hire more freelance psychologists, but this proves to be challenging due to financing and finding appropriate candidates who meet the criteria. Dave van Ginhoven proposed a solution of providing teachers with trainings that could help them recognize concerning behaviour (i.e., radicalization, self-harm, etc.).

Fee Romein explained that recently the Wellbeing Week was organized. During this week, there were multiple workshops and informative sessions that addressed topics ranging from mental health to loss, grief and difficult situations at home. Despite a significant number of registrations, the number of attendances was lower than expected. While there is no exact explanation for why students tend to get discouraged whenever they have to participate in group sessions or activities, it did become a topic for research recently, but no information could be provided on this yet. Additionally, according to Romein, if students were to go to the Student Portal, then to Services, and then click on the tile named 'Helping Hand', they should land on a page containing information for all students that assist them in dealing with difficult situations.

5. Analysis

The following chapter will take the results from the previous chapter and further analyse and interpret them in relation to the Theoretical Framework and research questions. This chapter will be structured in a similar manner to the chapters Theoretical Framework and Results. The order and information in the operationalization table from the Theoretical Framework will be used as a foundation for analysing the data.

5.1 Academic pressure

Based on the information found in the Theoretical Framework, a lack of sufficient guidance was one of the more commonly reported complaints among students. The three studies conducted by LSVb, Windesheim, and ASVA all reported on this trend. It could be argued that students from THUAS and the ES programme agree with this, as the results from the survey did show a majority that agreed with the guidance offered by the ES programme to be insufficient, or not sufficient enough, in dealing with academic pressure. This overlaps with the information found in the Theoretical Framework, as in the research done by both LSVb and ASVA, this was a common complaint among the respondents. Some of the open answers in the survey did strengthen this claim as students referred to the guidance offered by on-campus psychologists or counsellors to be either too result driven or not emphatic enough for students to feel either comfortable or helped. However, according to both Dave van Ginhoven and Fee Romein, there should be other options within the programme and the university, besides ECA's or counsellors, that could provide support to students. These exist in the form of trajectories which are available to students on the intranet of the university, as most of these can be found on the Student Portal, under Services (and Helping Hand). Nevertheless, these portals or tools are not as frequently visited as hoped. Both Van Ginhoven and Romein state this could be explained due to the complicated nature of the portals available to both teachers and students. Both agreed on the difficulties they have faced while navigating for example the Blackboard portal, a tool used by teachers to share module contents, homework, and updates regarding the course among other things. Because of its complicated structuring it could be an explanation for why students might avoid interaction with these platforms as often as possible. Both the programme and the university are aware of these issues, but no plans to improve are currently made or known as changing this would be both an expensive and lengthy process. The problem that arises from this issue is that communication gets overlooked, important notifications are not received, and students remain in the dark on possibly important information. Crucial information students might miss could include topics that are relevant to mental wellbeing and support for students that might require it, thus this could

be an opportunity for improvement. Perhaps a merger of the two platforms – Student Portal and Blackboard – might eliminate some complexity for both students and teachers; create a more centralized platform that features all necessities.

Another interesting point that was raised by both interviewees is the aspect of expectation management that often seems to be out of balance. This is a two-sided issue, which can be concluded based on the results of both the qualitative and quantitative data collected. Fee Romein gave a useful example of this regarding the student psychologists; students might expect whenever they consult a professional to discuss experienced problems that these professionals will have plenty of time available. This is, unfortunately, not the case. Due to the high number of students they must accommodate while working part-time, trajectories of five sessions are implemented per student. These trajectories are also academic related, and in case of non-academic problems, the student psychologist refers the student to either family doctors or advises the students finding further support elsewhere. However, the question that remains is where these expectations derive from. The most straightforward answer might be because they are simply not aware of this beforehand. Which raises the question whether this is communicated properly among parties. This would require further clarification in future studies.

The following example is a more forthright one, which is the mutual expectational patterns between teachers and students, which is arguably a more difficult one to measure as both parties might stake claim that their party ‘suffers’ more in terms of pressure or stress. These *claims* or arguments were among the results in both the questionnaire and interviews, where respondents often put the responsibility on teachers for not trying hard enough or provide sufficient support and education, Dave van Ginhoven made valid points in support of teachers. It could be compared to a game of *tug of war*: both parties pulling on either side of the rope convinced of their own perspectives. However, to elaborate further on the statements of Van Ginhoven which raises some questions on what students have come to expect from teachers. He stated that he contemplates whether students realize, especially during the past year, how much time teachers put into their work. An example he used was the making of video lectures; oftentimes, the process of preparing, recording, and editing can take up to six to eight hours for a typical one-and-a-half-hour video lecture – only to discover these are rarely watched by students. In other words, he wonders if students realize that not only they take their work home after a normal working day. Nonetheless, Van Ginhoven did stress that this the case for him personally and for his direct colleagues, but he cannot say with certainty that this is the case for everyone. There have been ideas to bridge this gap and give both parties a better understanding by organising a day to ‘*walk in each other’s shoes*’, but unfortunately this never

occurred due to difficulties in finding an effective format. It is a feasible idea that might require further research to host such a day, as it could indeed create more mutual understanding.

The second problem found in the Theoretical Framework was related to the high demands and expectations set by universities. Although this has not been extensively or literally discussed in the questionnaire, the section *academic pressure* could provide clarity as the questions or statements provided did ask the students in what forms they felt pressure in terms of their academics. As seen in the results section, the majority of students did feel pressure in the following regards: performing well on a daily basis, anxiousness in achieving academic objectives, performing well on tests or exams, having time to study, finishing assignments in time, and whether students are able to finish their studies without delay. Given most of the students admitted to feeling pressure, it could be concluded that part of this derives from expectations within the programme, due to the connections of the statements to schoolwork. Especially graduating without delay seems to be a common source of stress for students, as the respondents of the ASVA study rated the pressure felt as high to very high. This could be tied to financial reasons instead of academics, however, due to the loan system and the high costs of living. It goes without saying that the study programme or university is not the only source of this stressor, as pressure from family or from the person themselves could very well be the cause, so this must be taken into consideration. Nonetheless is this issue further strengthened by its correlation to another stressor in this section of the Theoretical Framework because it connects to students in other studies claiming the seemingly endless flow of assignments, exams and presentations causing significant amounts of pressure. According to Dave van Ginhoven, this is a known issue within the ES programme as well. Besides the complex nature of the programme, which will be discussed in more detail further in this section, the number of different courses, and the amount of assignments and projects over the course of four years is quite overwhelming. Van Ginhoven further elaborated that the programme is aware of this and it is working on finding solutions, although doing this is quite an intricate process.

The following points discussed are sectioned in the *solution* column in the operationalization table found in the Theoretical Framework on *pages 19 and 51-52*. These solutions will now be analysed further and will be compared to the results obtained through the survey and interviews. The first solution formulated was to put the responsibility of measuring student wellbeing on universities. When asked in the interview, both Fee Romein and Dave van Ginhoven stated THUAS currently does not measure student wellbeing specifically. There are surveys that touch on these issues lightly, but

no specific ones exist as of now. As mentioned before, there are plans in launching a study during the first year *100 Days* survey, but then focussed on higher year students. Up until last year the direct demand was not as high before, but due to the global pandemic and national lockdown measures, students were forced to continue their studies at home. Unfortunately, this affected their mental wellbeing to a large extent, hence the demand for action. Some of the study programmes might conduct their own studies, but according to Van Ginhoven, the ES programme does not.

The next solution was to provide sufficient guidance and counselling, but this raises the question; what could be considered sufficient. Does this mean a certain amount of hours a week that should be spent on students and their wellbeing, or does it mean availability of support whenever this is needed. In the last section of the questionnaire, two questions were asked in relation to seeking and receiving help from or at THUAS. A majority claimed they would, but only if this were related to academic performance. The next question asked from whom they would like to receive this help, and the result was fairly positive with most of respondents opting for on-campus support, whether this be from student psychologists, advisors, counsellors, or teachers. It could be concluded that the students do have faith in what the university has to offer. However, as mentioned before, the university is understaffed in this regard, due to the disproportionate ratio of psychologists to students. With only five active psychologists and approximately 26.000 students, it is only logical that not every student might receive the help they need in time. According to the questionnaire, this has hurt the perspective students have of this particular system. One of the solutions the university has been looking into is hiring more part-time freelancers which is unfortunately expensive. If the university would choose to pursue this solution, the ideal situation would be to hire them during peak periods (often during the fall), the freelancer can be repeatedly employed, and preferably freelancers that are familiar with the organisation.

Another possible solution could be to implement more check-in moments between teachers and students. One of the more uplifting but also debasing open answers found in the survey, was that some students thought that where the structural empathy lacked within the faculty or university, this being the debasing part, they did find it existed more prevalent among teachers. The reason for deeming this uplifting is because the strength of the student-teacher relationship can differ immensely per student and per teacher. Nevertheless, from both the questionnaire and the interview with Fee Romein, it became apparent that students value those check-in moments, as pro-activity from teachers often makes them feel heard. She further elaborates that it is often a common perspective from staff members to consider students as adults, meaning they will notify their teachers or other

faculty members if they need help, as the overall focus from the faculty and teachers is more on study progress and didactic supervision. However, especially now during the global pandemic, when students receive messages from their supervisors or teachers it positively impacts their wellbeing; they appreciate these small yet valuable deeds. In other words, perhaps some sort of structure can be implemented that would allow students to meet (virtually) with their teachers if they would require this. Dave van Ginhoven also proposed a solution that could benefit all parties. Speaking from personal experience, he believed it would have helped him if he had some sort of training in recognizing and dealing with concerning behaviour. This could include all different sorts of behaviour, from radicalization to self-harm and more. He stated that over the course of his professional career he came across difficult situations that at the time were challenging for him to navigate, as he lacked either the 'tools' to provide adequate help or did not know how to approach the subject without offending or scaring the student in question. By providing such training, teachers could be better equipped in dealing with difficult situations, but also in understanding what steps need to be taken in order to help a student. This could relieve some pressure from student psychologists, and it could even encourage cooperation between these two parties.

The last solution of this section would be to address mental health as a topic for open discussion. Sadly, there often still is a certain negative perception of people with mental conditions. This often prevents a person to seek help or to publicly discuss the difficulties they are facing. Fortunately, according to Fee Romein, THUAS is working on standardizing these topics with events such as the Wellbeing Week that was held in March 2021. During this week, trainings and sessions were held that revolved around stress, tension at home, loss and grief, and many other topics. Unfortunately, not many students participated despite the large number of registrations. Why this happened is currently a subject for research; to find out what prevents students from participating in such group activities and what kind of guidance they prefer (i.e., one-on-one, groups, etc.), as there currently is very little information on this.

5.2 Financial pressure

As seen in the previous chapters, financial pressure is often a prevalent stressor among students. In this section, a closer look will be taken at the results from the questionnaire, and problems and solutions found in the Theoretical Framework. A similar structure will be used to the previous section; problems first followed by a proposed or fitting solution. The first problem that might be the most predominant one is the implementation of the loan system in favour of the old system. Despite being an obstacle for students, Dave van Ginhoven argued the old financial aid system was incredibly

sensitive to fraudulent behaviour. For example, students claiming to live on their own to receive extra funding from the government, while in reality these students would live at home, meaning it could be argued that the loan system should be more effective as it is less sensitive to fraud as all financing is in the form of a loan. Unfortunately, the downside to this is the debt with which students now often graduate. In the survey, the majority of respondents were part of the loan system and also took out a

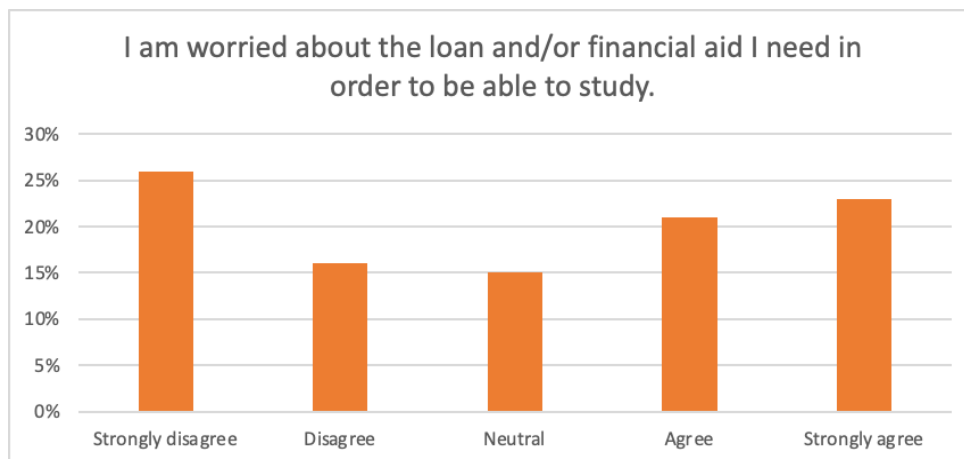


Figure 5.1: Results of the statement *I am worried about the loan and/or financial aid I need in order to be able to study.*

loan at DUO. Whether the survey takers worry about this loan was quite an interesting result. As seen in Figure 5.1, the majority does worry, however, on the other end of the scale – the majority in terms of single options – does not worry. This could either be because these respondents do not require loans, or do not worry due to the rather favourable terms of the loan. Nonetheless, this loan does cause stress amongst ES students. This is further strengthened by the pressure to graduate without delay to minimize the costs, a point frequently raised in the Theoretical Framework. The ideal solution to this could be to change the financial structure of education or the university, by changing it into a *pay-per-module* system. This would allow students to choose their own modules and pay for the education they would see fit. Logically, there would be requirements attached to this system, i.e., a minimum number of courses, at least one modern foreign language, a maximum number of electives, etc. Unfortunately, such a system could definitely not be a short-term solution, let alone a feasible one. Not only would this require participation from the university, but it would also require it from the government, as THUAS is a governmentally subsidised institute. Moreover, according to Van Ginhoven, the tuition students pay per month does not cover the total cost per student, which is said to be much higher. The remaining funds required to cover the cost per student is received from the government, which raises the question that if this system could or would be implemented, will it cost the students more or less money. What is known is that these costs increase for the university the longer a student delays finishing their studies.

The second problem is related to working next to academics, which, according to the Theoretical Framework, takes up valuable time from students, despite it being necessary to cover the costs of living. In order to measure to what extent ES students feel similar amounts of pressure or stress, these questions were featured in the survey. Most of the respondents claimed to work eight to 16 hours a week, which amounts to an average of two working days. These results are incredibly similar to the ASVA study used as the guideline for this dissertation. With 78% working next to their studies and maintaining an average of 13 working hours per week, it can be argued these students experience a similar amount of stress to the students discussed in this paper. To quote Van Ginhoven; *'studying is supposed to be a full-time job'*, thus in practicality this means that these students work a full six to seven days, which is rather worrying. Unfortunately, it is often necessary for students in order to cover their finances. According to the survey, the majority agrees on working next to their academics causing them large amounts of stress. Alas, there is little the university or study programme could do for students as financing is largely out of their hands. The only solution that could be provided is to reduce the workload of programme. According to Dave van Ginhoven, the workload of the ES-programme is indeed great, due to the excessive number of classes students have to follow each semester or even each week, plus the assignments that come with each module as well. He further states that this has undeniably increased and became more complicated over the years, but as stated before, this is currently being examined.

The last problem mentioned in the Theoretical Framework was the issue of marginal compensations students receive for their internships. Only a moderate number of respondents of the survey either finished or were currently doing their internship, thus the representation might not be optimal for this problem. Nonetheless, comparable to the results of other studies, ES students did agree that their compensation did not help to cover their costs of living properly. This is yet another issue that unfortunately is difficult to solve for the study programme, besides serving as a mediator in salary negotiations. Still, this could prove to be challenging as placement providers are not required to agree to any legal specifics, meaning they could pull their offer at any given moment.

5.3 Additional activities

Based on the information found in the Theoretical Framework, it indicated that additional activities were the lesser stressor among the four main stressors discussed in this dissertation. Nonetheless, in order to find out whether this is applicable to ES students this topic has been discussed in the questionnaire. As seen in the Results chapter, the majority did not participate in additional activities,

however, less respondents opted for spending zero hours on said activities. It could be that they did not consider personal exercise or hobbies to count as additional activities, but still wanted to clarify they did indeed spend time on other pastimes besides academics and working. Of the students that participated, only a small percentage worried this might consume too much time they could spend on studying. When analysing the individual answers, most of these were related to student associations, which sounds reasonable, because as seen in the Theoretical Framework being a member of a student association required dedication and time, with some members spending more than 20 hours on tasks related to these organisations. When comparing the results of whether additional activities hinder students, the outcome was in line with the studies of other institutions and organisations. In Figure 5.2, an interesting division can be seen in the ratings of the statements *'I am afraid these activities might consume too much time, which I could spend on studying'*, and *'I believe these activities positively help me with my day-to-day functioning, studies and overall wellbeing'*. The responses reflect both the information found, as well as the statements; the latter statement being positively written and gathering positive responses while the opposite can be said for the first statement and its results. In other words, it can be said with fair certainty that students do not consider most of these activities as a hinderance to their academics. This aligns with the information found in previous chapters, as results showed that additional activities were the least impactful in terms of inducing stress.

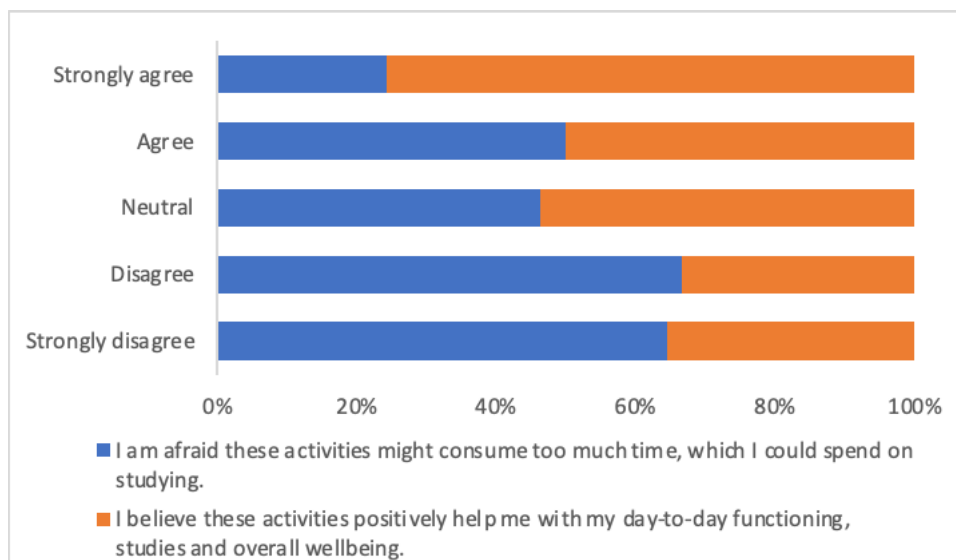


Figure 5.2: Results part of the Additional Activities section of the survey.

The next problem described in the Theoretical Framework was that there is no compensation for doing additional activities, whether this be financial or academic, besides a 'nice' addition to the resume (in case of voluntary work or student associations) which is appealing when competing in the labour

market. Despite this not being properly addressed in the questionnaire, it has been discussed in the interview with Dave van Ginhoven and he mentioned that a colleague of his used to advocate for more internships, something which could prove to be useful for students. It could give students the opportunity to rely less on additional activities and provide them with two separate chances to obtain more working experience. Furthermore, students could also increase their interdisciplinary knowledge by choosing one internship in the field of private, while choosing a second internship in the public sector, which is something the ES-programme strives for. Making this a part of the standard curriculum could help students in reducing time spent on activities that *could* help their resume and simultaneously give them an opportunity of gaining both credits and experience.

Another possible solution could be to compensate students with credits for participating in additional activities such as voluntary work or possibly even working at a company for one or two weeks. There is a first- and second-year course at the ES-programme called Living and Working in Europe, or LWE for short, that requires students to spend a total of 56 hours on an activity that reflects the nature of the programme, and this could be the aforementioned activities. While this is a useful course for students to learn more about their studies, how it applies practically speaking and to gain potential working experience, it is only limited to first- and second-year students. Besides making the choice of saving the assignment for later academic years and complete it during the internship for example, it still excludes students of higher years that might be able to use the course more effectively as their sense of direction is potentially better developed. Advocating for extracurricular modules that provide third-, fourth- and higher-year students with more opportunities for building working experience and a strong resume could be a good solution.

5.4 Interpersonal factors

The final stressor of the primary four is *interpersonal factors*, which concerns itself with any potential situation or source of stress outside of academic and financial factors. This includes personal and family-related issues that might have happened in the past or that are currently taking place that causes students to feel stressed. Examples of such could be a recent death in the family, illness, identity crises, etc. The questionnaire had three brief questions regarding this topic that asked students whether they have dealt with personal or family related issues, an optional open answer field for elaboration, and a five-point Likert-scale statement on how much this influenced the academic performance of the respondent. The majority indeed experienced said issues and agreed this influenced their academic performance, which is more than in the studies from the Theoretical Framework. In the research conducted in previous chapters, it was concluded that interpersonal issues

pose a potential threat to the mental wellbeing of a student, and that there is insufficient help available from institutions to deal with such issues. Connecting this back to the questionnaire section *seeking help*, there were questions regarding whether students would like to receive help from either the ES-programme or THUAS, to which the overall response was positive. The majority would actually like to receive help from the university or faculty, albeit mostly if their issues are academic related, the demand is still present. It seems that students at the ES-programme are not fully aware of the multitude of channels and options THUAS offers in terms of trajectories, trainings, or even external organisations offering support to students. This became mostly apparent during the interviews with both candidates. Fee Romein even provided several options that came to mind, many of which were discussed in the Wellbeing Week; the event that saw plenty of registrations but not as many attendees. The question of why this is has been asked several times throughout this dissertation, and as mentioned before, this could dial back to the issue of poor communication due to the complexity of the intranet and portals of THUAS. According to Romein, if students were to go to the Student Portal, then to Services, and then click on the tile called 'Helping Hand' then they should land on a page containing information for all students, despite their personal situation. Furthermore, external organisations such as YOUZ and Indigo offer free trainings specifically for young adults on this page as well. As said before, a student needs to be aware of this to make use of it, which is often not the case unfortunately. Normally, whenever a student faces difficult situations, they go to their class supervisor, or ECA, for support in hope they can assist them. However, if a teacher or supervisor is not fully aware or familiar with these portals, this crucial information is lost. This automatically provides an opportunity for improvement for the programme and even the university; to assure all teachers and supervisors are aware of these channels. In reality, it again comes down to streamlining the internal infrastructure of the intranet of the university as the most ideal solution. Many problems could be solved by simplifying these tools, or if this proves to be an unpractical or expensive solution, assure students know where to find this information by hosting a mandatory introductory lecture.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to research stress levels amongst students at the ES programme and write fitting recommendations for the programme if it is established that improvements are indeed required. In order to conclude this paper, an answer will be provided to the main research question. The conclusion in this chapter will summarize key findings of the conducted research for this dissertation, followed by fitting recommendations for the ES programme. A questionnaire was created for the students to complete in order to research the current situation at the programme. Furthermore, two interviews were conducted with two THUAS employees to obtain information that might be hard to acquire otherwise.

In the research, sources of student stress were categorized into the four main factors *academic*, *financial*, *additional activities* and *interpersonal factors*, which could be considered the most straightforward answer to *what causes stress among students*. Per factor, multiple situations were considered to be the more dominant stressors. These included:

- Academic – demands and expectations set by universities, lack of sufficient guidance, and the seemingly endless flow of assignments, presentations, and exams.
- Financial – the implementation of the loan system, pressure to graduate without delay, working next to studies in order to cover the costs of living, and marginal compensation for internships.
- Additional activities – additional activities costing too much time, no academic or financial compensation besides a ‘nice addition to a resume’, and the pressure students feel to compete on the labour market in the future.
- Interpersonal factors – family issues supposedly pose a threat for the mental wellbeing of students, and no active or sufficient help from institutions to deal with such issues.

In order to research whether these were applicable to the students at the ES programme, a questionnaire was created and distributed among these students. From the results it could be concluded that to the larger extent these stressors indeed applied to ES students. One of the main results was that students did not think the guidance or support offered by the programme was sufficient. Furthermore, majorities were seen agreeing with questions that asked respondents about the pressure of performing well daily, feeling anxious of potentially not achieving academic objectives, fear of not performing well on tests or finishing assignments in time, and finally, in being afraid of not being able to graduate without a study delay. In addition, Dave van Ginhoven stated that the

programme has become more complicated over its lifetime, and especially in terms of the number of modules and assignments – something the programme is aware of according to Van Ginhoven. In terms of guidance, European Studies and THUAS appear to have quite some channels and tools available that could help students. This became apparent during the interviews with both interviewees. However, there appear to be issues in this regard, as students might not be as aware of these as they should be. This could mainly be caused by the overly complex nature of the Student Portal and other tools such as Blackboard. As there is no communication after posting updates, this information might be lost on students. Another key problem that both respondents of the questionnaire and Fee Romein addressed is the long waiting lists at the student psychologists, which prevents students from receiving the help or the support needed. Some respondents further elaborated that they thought the psychologists were more result driven and solely focussed on academic performance. Romein explained that this is due to the uneven student-to-psychologist ratio, with only five available staff members and 26.000 students, it is close to impossible to provide full help to whomever might need it. In order to tackle this issue, psychologists work with five-session trajectories, before referring them to another specialist (i.e., a family doctor) in case students need this. This might be something most students are not aware of, hence the comments from some of the respondents. The final point in terms of academic pressure was the complex nature of the study programme. Due to the high number of different courses, assignments, and presentations, students feel overwhelmed. This was confirmed by Van Ginhoven in the interview, who claimed the programme became more filled and complex over the years.

In terms of financial pressure, this proves to be a prevalent stressor among the respondents of the questionnaire and the reports used for reference. A majority worried about the loan they had to take out to finance their studies, which is strengthened by the pressure to graduate without delay to minimize costs. It is difficult for the university or the programme to help students in this regard, as their influence is minimal. Moreover, most students work next to their studies in order to finance their studies and lives. With an average working week of 13 hours, it takes up valuable time from students, causing stress as a result. In order to relieve this pressure, the programme could analyse its workload as a potential recommendation, which will be discussed in the next section. Another financial issue addressed in the results was the marginal compensation received for internships. Unfortunately, due to a lower number of respondents who were either currently doing their internship or had finished theirs, the results might not represent the overall situation accurately. Nonetheless, a vast majority did claim their compensation was not sufficient to help cover the costs of living.

According to the results of the questionnaire, additional activities proved not to be as much of a hinderance to respondents. This aligned with the results from the Theoretical Framework, as students from other studies did not consider this as much of a problem either. Still, student associations took up most time and caused most stress of the mentioned additional activities, a similar result to that of other studies. The second problem regarding additional activities was, besides contributing to a resume, the absence of financial or academic compensation for doing said activities. More internships were a topic of conversation, and according to Dave van Ginhoven, one colleague advocated specifically for this. Either more internships or extracurricular modules could help students build a strong resume and prevent time being 'wasted' on additional activities that have minimal remuneration.

The fourth and final stressor of the primary four, interpersonal factors, had most respondents admitting to having experienced personal or family related issues during their studies. This influenced their academic performance significantly. This was a similar result to the Theoretical Framework and the studies researched in that chapter. A more interesting outcome of the survey of this dissertation was the majority of respondents preferring to receive help from the university, which is in contrast to some of the results which would indicate students preferred off-campus help. Despite the main focus being on academic performance, it did show promise regarding students seeing potential in what support the university has to offer. The interviews provided insight on what possibilities are present for student support. Unfortunately, it also showed that student interaction and participation is low and information on why this is, is scarce. In other words, further investigation is required.

6.2 Recommendation

This final section will provide the ES programme at THUAS with fitting recommendations based on the information described in the Theoretical Framework, Results, and Analysis chapters. The recommendations provided are listed from most feasible to least feasible based on the estimated complexity of the offered solution.

The first recommendation is a quite straightforward one and among the most feasible, as the following suggestion for the ES programme is to start surveying student wellbeing and behavioural characteristics. As Romein stated in the interview, there is little influence the university has on study programmes in this regard, and if the ES programme wants to intervene more effectively, perhaps surveying their students might be a suitable first step. The option of researching behavioural

characteristics connects back to the interview with Fee Romein. As seen during the Wellbeing Week, students do appreciate initiatives such as these, but when it comes to participation there seems to be an obstacle. Further research is necessary and understanding these patterns might help ES to support their students more sufficiently. Furthermore, it might provide the programme with an insight on what kind of guidance students require as this was a main issue in the studies both conducted by this dissertation as in the reports used in the Theoretical Framework. According to Fee Romein, research conducted by the university proved students value check-in moments from their teachers, especially during the past year. It made students feel heard and it positively contributed to their mental wellbeing and motivation. This could perhaps be a preliminary measurement by implementing one or two hours a week in which students can (virtually) meet with their teachers or supervisors.

The second recommendation is to improve on the existing communication framework of the programme and possibly the university. As seen in the Analysis, interaction with the platforms Blackboard and Student Portal is quite low as students might not use it unless they need to, resulting in important information being overlooked. One of the reasons provided is due to the complexity of these platforms, which is confirmed by both Dave van Ginhoven and Fee Romein who have experienced difficulties in navigating these platforms. The key focus here is to update students on matters regarding mental wellbeing. As Fee Romein stated, the university has numerous support channels available to help students with difficult situations, but she further elaborated that this is 'hidden' behind the Student Portal. If students were never made aware of these channels, the chances are small they would be visited by students independently. More specifically, streamlining the internal infrastructure of the intranet of the university would be the most ideal solution. Many problems could be solved by simplifying these tools, or if this proves to be an unpractical or expensive solution, assure students know where to find this information by hosting a mandatory introductory lecture.

The third recommendation could be improved by implementing the second recommendation. Enhancing communication might aid in improving mutual expectation management between students, teachers, and the study programme or university as well. In the Results chapter of this dissertation, it was mentioned mutual expectation management seemed to be an issue. The Analysis mentioned the idea of hosting a day to *walk in each other's shoes*, proposed by Dave van Ginhoven. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in finding a fitting format of hosting such a day, this event was never realized. It is recommended for the programme to explore this project, to 'bridge the gap' between students and teachers and to create a stronger mutual understanding.

The fourth recommendation is to investigate the possibility of training teachers in recognizing concerning behaviour. As mentioned in the Analysis, training teachers in recognizing concerning behaviour might prove to be very useful. As Van Ginhoven mentioned he were certain it would have helped him in his earlier years of teaching. By doing so, this would help educators in assisting students by identifying the right course of action in case it would be necessary. Moreover, it might relieve pressure from student psychologists as well, as stated in the Results and Analysis chapters, as the waiting lists are very long. Respondents of the survey mentioned that this has led to them not receiving the help they had anticipated. This anticipation is a point of attention as it connects to mutual expectation management. The university should investigate how clear the trajectories are for students, to avoid disappointment – meaning, are they aware of the five-session trajectory, if not; make sure this becomes common knowledge. Nonetheless, hiring more freelance psychologists might not be a feasible solution short term, training teachers could be an opportunity worth investigating.

The fifth recommendation is to research the possibility of providing students with more opportunities for obtaining working experience and extra credits for doing additional activities. Advocating for extracurricular modules that provide third-, fourth- and higher-year students with more opportunities for building working knowledge and a strong resume could be a good solution. It is expected that this solution is a rather difficult one, hence its lower placement. A good place to start might be to conduct a study amongst ES students to research whether there is a demand for it – and possibly a second internship opportunity. However, in case of following up on this recommendation, do stress this is a *non-compulsory* opportunity for students that *want* to enhance their resume.

The final recommendation is to examine the complexity of the programme and reduce the workload. This recommendation has been deemed the least feasible as it would require the greatest changes from within the programme, however, it is considered noteworthy as it has been stressed numerous times in this dissertation that the study programme has become more complex over the years. Dave van Ginhoven stated that when he studied the programme, the workload was significantly less. It is valuable for the programme to educate their students as varied and thorough as possible, which in itself is not a bad thing, however, for students having to follow approximately 10 courses per week, each having its own assignments and deadlines, the workload does become very intense. A first step could be to examining where there is overlap in modules, their relevance to the chosen specialization, and re-evaluate testing frequency and moments.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Theoretical Framework: Organisation Descriptions

Landelijke Studenten Vakbond (LSVb) – LSVb is a national student organization that works for the best interest of students in The Netherlands. After experiencing an increase of students reporting psychological complaints, LSVb decided to research the number of students that experience these issues. It was unclear what the exact number was, what the consequences were and whether it could have been prevented. In this study, not only students but also guidance counsellors and student psychologists played a key role to ensure the best results (Schmidt & Simons, 2013).

ASVA Onderzoeksbureau (ASVA) – ASVA is an Amsterdam-based organization that reports and protects the common interest of students in Amsterdam. It is a direct source of reliable information for the municipality of Amsterdam, the media, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) and the University of Amsterdam (UvA). This study is a direct response to the study conducted by LSVb in 2013. According to ASVA, numbers were still increasing and after the study grant system was replaced by the loan system, 49% of Dutch students reported experiencing psychological complaints (Sierhuis, 2018).

Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg (ISO) – ISO is a student organization with approximately 750.000 (student)members, posing as an important interlocutor for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, political parties and the agencies of universities and universities of applied sciences. This report serves as a direct response to the national government who promised to conduct a research in student well-being but would not take any action until the results were obtained and processed by the end of 2021. ISO was disappointed in this statement and decided to conduct their own research to show what the current situation is. With an increase in burn-out related complaints, ISO believed taking action was necessary (Litjens & Ruijbroek, 2019).

Appendix B – Methodology: Operationalization Table

Factor	Problem	Solution
Academic pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sufficient guidance. • High demands and expectations set by universities. • Seemingly endless flow of assignments, exams, and presentations. • Pressure to graduate without delay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities responsible for analysing student wellbeing. • Provide sufficient guidance/counselling. • Addressing mental health as a topic for open discussion to encourage students to talk about it with staff or peers. • Abolish credit system; students no longer need to acquire a minimum amount of credits to continue.
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often does THUAS measure student wellbeing? If so, how often? If not, why not/what can be done to make it happen? • What initiatives exist within ES to discuss mental health openly (courses, support groups, etc.)? • What demands and expectations exist within ES (credits, courses, assignments, etc.)? 	
Financial pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the loan system; pressure to graduate without delay. • Working next to studies takes up too much time; necessary to cover costs of living. • Marginal compensation for internships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relieving students of pressure to graduate without delay; change the financial structure. • Ensure students receive sufficient compensation for internships; universities could act as a mediator.
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How important is it for ES that students graduate without delay? 	
Additional activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional activities cost too much time. • No academic or financial compensation except for a 'nice addition to a resume'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with compensations for additional activities; earn credits for doing voluntary work for example.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel they need it to compete in the labour market; results in added pressure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assist students in building up their resume; relieves them of stress/anxiety of competing on the labour market.
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is being done to help students prepare for competing in the labour market? 	
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family issues supposedly pose a threat for the mental wellbeing of students. No active or sufficient help from institutions to deal with such issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing mental health as a topic for open discussion to encourage students to talk about it with family, friends, or peers.
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What current trajectories exist to support students in dealing with difficult situations at home or past events? What kind of guidance is offered at ES? How is this guidance decided? And, who offers it? 	

Appendix C – Methodology: Questionnaire Questions**Questionnaire – ‘How can the European Studies programme at THUAS reduce stress levels among its students?’**

For my final dissertation I am researching whether the students of the European Studies programme experience large amounts of stress. The goal is to find out what forms of psychological complaints are most common among students at European Studies, and, based on the results, to find a solution to the problem. According to research conducted by Landelijke Studenten Vakbond (LSVb), ASVA Onderzoeksbureau (ASVA) and Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg (ISO), the four main factors of student stress in The Netherlands derive from academic pressure, financial pressure, additional activities, and inter-personal situations. Through this survey, I want to analyse if this is the case with students following the European Studies programme.

Identification

- 1. What is your age?**
 - a. Younger than 18
 - b. 18
 - c. 19
 - d. 20
 - e. 21
 - f. 22
 - g. 23
 - h. 24
 - i. 25
 - j. Older than 25
- 2. What is your nationality?**
- 3. What is your gender?**
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer not to disclose

4. What academic year are you currently in?
 - a. First year
 - b. Second year
 - c. Third year
 - d. Fourth year
 - e. Delayed (Fifth or higher)
5. Is this your first time enrolled in an academic programme?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
6. Is this your first time enrolled in an academic programme in The Netherlands?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Psychological Information

According to the studies conducted by LSVb, ASVA and ISO, the most common psychological complaints students experience during their studies include anxiety, depression, and exhaustion. In reality, the list is much longer, but the three aforementioned complaints are often the most prominent. Usually, these complaints are direct results of persistent stress, both short and long term. This section serves as an informative foundation for the next section, making it easier to link complaints to specific stressors.

7. Did you ever experience psychological complaints during the course of your studies?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. What complaints have you experienced? (Multiple answers possible)
 - a. Depression
 - b. Exhaustion
 - c. Anxiety
 - d. Panic attacks
 - e. Structural stress
 - f. Performance anxiety
 - g. (Severe) lack of concentration
 - h. (Severe) demotivation

- i. Burn-out
- j. Other, ...

9. On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent did this influence your student life?

- a. 1. Not at all – 2. Slightly – 3. Normal/Neutral – 4. Quite – 5. Severe

10. Did you seek help after experiencing these complaints?

- a. Yes, from medical experts and people close to me (e.g. family and friends)
- b. Yes, only from people close to me (e.g. family and friends)
- c. No, because I don't know where/how but I want to
- d. No, no interest/not needed.

11. Who did you ask for help? (multiple answers possible)

- a. Off-campus psychologist/counsellor
- b. On-campus psychologist/counsellor
- c. Family
- d. Friends
- e. No one/not needed.
- f. Others, ...

Main Factors of Student Stress [1/4] – Academic Pressure

The following section contains questions related to the stressors students experience from their academic surroundings. These include a high to very high workload, the pressure of graduating without delay and student guidance or a lack thereof.

Respond to the following questions by choosing a number on the scale that corresponds with your answer - from '(1) Strongly disagree' to '(5) Strongly agree'.

12. I experience pressure to perform well academically on a daily basis.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

13. I regularly feel anxious I might not achieve my academic objectives.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

14. I often am afraid I will not perform well on tests/exams.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

15. I often worry I am not able to finish my assignments on time.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

16. I often worry I do not have enough time to study for my exams.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

17. I am afraid I will not be able to finish my studies without delay.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree

18. In my experience, the guidance offered by the ES programme has not been sufficient to properly help me deal with academic pressure.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

Main Factors of Student Stress [2/4] – Financial Pressure

The following section contains questions related to the stressors students experience from their financial situation. These include financial compensation for doing an internship, the implementation of the loan system and the pressure of covering the costs of living.

Respond to the following questions by choosing a number on the scale that corresponds with your answer - from '(1) Strongly disagree' to '(5) Strongly agree'.

19. Shortages in financial resources cause me to experience stress and prevent me from having an enjoyable student life.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

20. I experience financial pressure because I have to pay for things such as rent, studies, books, etc., and I can barely afford it.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

21. Please specify which financial aid/loan system you are a part of.

- a. Old model – Studiefinancieringsstelsel (study grant/partial loan)
- b. New model – Leenstelsel (full loan)
- c. None

22. Do you have to take out a loan to finance your studies?

- a. Yes
- b. No

23. Who or what was your primary source of financial aid/earning?

- a. DUO/Government
- b. Bank
- c. Family

- d. Work
- e. Other
- f. Prefer not to disclose

24. How much financial aid in the form of a loan do you require a month?

- a. None
- b. Less than €100
- c. Between €100 and €250
- d. Between €250 and €500
- e. Between €500 and €750
- f. Between €750 and €1000
- g. More than €1000
- h. Prefer not to disclose

25. I am worried about the loan and/or financial aid I need in order to be able to study.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

26. Do you work next to your studies?

- a. Yes
- b. No

27. Please specify your average working hours a week (multiple answers possible).

- a. 0 hours
- b. 0-8 hours
- c. 8-16 hours
- d. 16-24 hours
- e. 24-32 hours
- f. More than 32 hours.

28. Working next to my studies causes large amounts of stress.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

29. Have you completed your internship yet? If not, you may skip the following questions and continue to the next section 'Additional Activities'.

- a. Yes
- b. I am currently doing my internship.
- c. No

30. Do or did you receive financial compensation for your work?

- a. Yes
- b. No

31. Please specify the amount.

Main Factors of Student Stress [3/4] – Additional Activities

Please do note that activities such as participating in team sports, personal exercise and voluntary work are also considered additional activities, meaning take this into account when answering the following questions.

Respond to the following questions by choosing a number on the scale that corresponds with your answer - from '(1) Strongly disagree' to '(5) Strongly agree'.

32. Do you partake in activities next to your studies (might be linked to your studies such as Student Associations)?

- a. Yes
- b. No

33. What activities do you partake in?

34. Please specify the average weekly hours you spend on these activities.

- a. 0 hours
- b. 0-8 hours
- c. 8-16 hours
- d. 16-24 hours
- e. 24-32 hours
- f. More than 32 hours.

35. I think these activities might consume too much time, which I could spend on studying.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

36. I believe these activities positively help me with my day-to-day life, studies, and overall wellbeing.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

Main Factors of Student Stress [4/4] – Interpersonal Situations

Respond to the following questions by choosing a number on the scale that corresponds with your answer - from '(1) Strongly disagree' to '(5) Strongly agree'.

37. Were there personal or family situations during your studies that negatively impacted your academic performance and student life?

- a. Yes
- b. No

38. These situations have had a large impact on my student life and academic performance.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

39. Please elaborate if you want to. If not, you can leave the field empty.

Behavioural Characteristics

Respond to the following questions by choosing a number on the scale that corresponds with your answer - from '(1) Strongly disagree' to '(5) Strongly agree'.

40. I aim to perform the best as I possibly can academically.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

41. I like to stand out from my peers through my academic achievements.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

42. I have the tendency to postpone my work.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

43. I have difficulties with time management.

- a. 1. Strongly disagree – 5. Strongly agree.

Seeking Help

In order to provide the European Studies programme with possible solutions, I want to know if there is a demand for it. Please do not solely base your answer on your current situation, but also try to approach it from a different point of view: what if you would be in a situation in which you would like to receive help?

44. Would you prefer to seek help from The Hague University of Applied Sciences/European Studies programme if or when you experience psychological complaints, especially if or when these complaints are related to your academic performance?

- a. Yes
- b. No

45. From whom would you prefer to receive help?

- a. Student psychologist
- b. Student advisor/counsellor
- c. Teachers
- d. Off-campus
- e. Other, ...

46. Please leave a comment if you have anything to add or ideas that might help. If not, you may leave the field empty.

Appendix D – Results: Interview with Dave van Ginhoven (Full Transcript)

DS: I will start the recording now. So, I'm going to record the session, do I have your consent to do so?

DG: Absolutely.

DS: Great, amazing. Can you state your name in your position?

DG: Sure, my name is Dave van Ginhoven, and my position is that I am a senior lecturer at European studies, and in addition to being a teacher I am responsible for our Study Association, for public relations for the programme, and to a certain extent the student community.

DS: Perfect, thank you. As you know, I have conducted a questionnaire among students at European Studies to see what their point of view is, and the goal of this dissertation and the questionnaire is to find out how high the stress levels among ES students are and how we can reduce these if this is necessary. I have taken three other studies as a theoretical framework or theoretical foundation and based on that I've created the questionnaire. This interview will be sort of an extension to the questionnaire for the questions that were not answered in the questionnaire. For these unanswered questions, I thought it might be best to get them from people within the study programme or within the University. So, there are four questions that are really directly related to mental health topics and three that are kind of on other matters. So, it will be a short interview, but we can make it as elaborate as possible. My first question is if THUAS measures student wellbeing? If so, how often? If not, why not and how could it happen or could it be implemented?

DG: I don't think that it's ever been measured as such, not directly at least. I think that one of the things that you might have noticed as a student here is that the University is that the programmes do a lot of research about how students are feeling about different things which could be course evaluations for example. The class representatives meet regularly with coordinators and communicate what's going on and how people are feeling. The university's own sort of research is the '100 Days' in which the hundred days after the school year starts they ask first year students about how they're feeling. There's also the National Student Survey which is a student satisfaction survey and I think the topic comes up in a lot of that research, but it's never been its explicit focus. Since the corona crisis that's changed a little bit in that, I don't want to use the term panic, but there's been a certain amount of concern about students and last semester I saw I think I saw three different surveys go by specifically about wellbeing. Everybody has the best intentions, but when you look at how the

university deals with these things, the short answer kind of being *not great*, but not for lack of trying. There are so many different individuals and organizations that all want to help. For example, I saw that our own programme committee did a survey, and then the faculty council did a survey, and then the university did another survey. Everybody is doing a survey on how students feel. I trust you; you don't want to see the results.

DS: I know, it's quite intense I have to admit, it really is. Now that you mention it, having other institutions help with these issues was actually one of the comments that students left in the questionnaire. One of the participants mentioned to possibly create stronger connections with institutions or organizations that could do these things for the programme, for the faculty or for the university. I was even thinking maybe it could be a student initiative in exchange for LWE [Living and Working in Europe] credits and could this, for example, be an option? Could this be a solution or is this something that you would think maybe is more of an institution matter?

DG: Sadly, the best answer I can give you is I really don't know. I think that's going to be my answer to a lot of your questions to be honest. It's a frightening thing, but just to go back to a thing when it comes to stress, and if I explain this it will highlight the difficulty we have with this. We have almost tracked that in the past with our evaluations. I use this example in a lot of my research classes; I used to be the first-year coordinator and we didn't evaluate the courses individually; we did a big semester evaluation a couple years in a row. We did one during an exam period actually, but the exam board said that we could not do that anymore. We did this two years in a row and we got a big response rate. Biggest we've ever had was around 330 two years in a row. That was really quite insightful, but one of the things that we did was we always asked students how you experience the workload; is it easy to manage, is it manageable, is it neither easy nor hard, is it somewhat difficult to manage or is it really difficult to manage. And the overwhelming majority, and I must have used this question three or four times, every year you'd get like 86% saying it's unmanageably hard. Unmanageable. The thing is I teach research for living so I'm not stupid, I know that you can't just ask people the question like that. The next question on the survey was '*how many hours do you invest in your studies every week, including going to class?*'; zero to ten, 11 to 20, 21 to 30, 31 to 40, or 41 and up. The overwhelming majority, every time, told us either zero to 10 or 11 to 20. Of course, studying is supposed to be a full-time job. I'm not saying – please don't jump to the conclusion that I'm saying students don't have stress and we talk about the normal situation here, not about the COVID-situation – but I fundamentally believe that students do have stress and that they do experience their workload as a

lot. However, I also think that, in particular the pre-COVID situation, that's almost more of an issue of poor expectation management than it is an issue of the actual workload. That said, I think what you can also conclude out of a lot of the research that I did on students in those days is, if I applied it to the COVID-situation, what I would say is that it seems very clear that a lot of students really don't have the discipline or the intrinsic motivation for higher education in general. I'm not saying that to be negative, because some of that is on them, some of that is on us, and some of it is on high school. I kind of blame high schools to a large extent as well. I think these days in the Netherlands, if you're in high school your teachers are using a website like Magister and they're putting your homework assignment in there. When you get home your mom and dad are checking and then one of them says that *'oh, you've got to do some geography homework for tomorrow, why are you not doing it?'*. Kids who are 17 go from that environment to an environment where Mr. Van Ginhoven says stuff is on blackboard, you can figure it out. A lot of not ready for that under the best of circumstances. They are so used to being micromanaged and to be placed in a given structure - and I understand this too because I have ADHD and I need structure in my life – but if you come into higher education and you don't have that skill of managing your time of really planning out your work or any of that, it is quite difficult and that's under the best circumstances. Now, you flash forward to an online only situation and it's a disaster for some kids. They just they don't have, and I've said this in the past in a different context before COVID, I don't believe that our students have the intrinsic motivation or the discipline for online learning. They just don't. It's not in them, some of them do, but in general they don't.

DS: Yes because there are just too many distractions.

DG: Yeah, I mean it's true if I was you and I could choose between looking at me ranting about research in the corner of my screen and watching Netflix, I would probably pick Netflix too, you know what I mean? I've been sceptical about blended learning in the past for this very reason as I've observed this phenomenon. I have a flipped classroom course and the enthusiasm is not really there, students don't really watch the videos. It can work, blended learning, when it adds value and is carefully planned. But I think that, I argued in the past, if we switch over to this type of system it won't work with our students because they kind of need a certain amount of parenting. They need to come to class and see a teacher who will tell them what they actually have to do, and we could argue about whether or not that's a good thing, I don't really think it is, because we're trying to prepare them for a world where they're on their own. You know we actually care about them. Chris Rock has a routine in one of his specials where he talks about how he's preparing his daughters for the real world and he says, *'I say to my*

daughters every day in this house you are special but out there nobody gives about you' and that is the truth of the world. When you go out next year after you get your diploma, and you start applying for jobs, it's going to be hard and none of those people care about you. They care about what you can or can't do for them and it's going to take a while before you get your foot in the door and you're going to have to work hard for lousy money and all the pressure is going to be on you. If I want to prepare you for that, my job is to try to find a way – I'm clearly not doing it well – but my job, and I don't mean me as a person, but I mean as a teacher in higher education, is to try to take you from that high school *'tell me what to do'*-mentality to that *'I'm going to figure this out for myself'*. I think that that's incredibly difficult to do. Partly because of the structure of education and the nature of it and partly because of the ES programme in and of itself is problematic in this regard – I'll come back to why in a second – but also because of student mentality and to some extent of what they expect. When you look at the student complaints there are a lot of patterns there and one of the patterns is that their expectations aren't very realistic. It is not realistic to think that someone's going to call you every week to see how you are doing. There are 1300 students in this programme, not every ECA has the time to call up 30 kids every week to see how they're doing. I think we would all do it if we had the time. The whole thing is quite complicated because of all these expectations. I hope I don't sound like I'm being negative about students, and I don't mean to, but it's a complicated situation because it's challenging to be a student right now. I think students had a really bad year, you guys collectively, you have to have some of the worst restrictions in a way. Your lives have been disrupted more heavily than other peoples for a disease that isn't even going to kill you.

DS: It's good to hear you say that because there are a lot of people, especially people from an older generation that claim it's not harder for students, it is not harder for students because you're young, but let's all be very honest; that's nonsense, it's untrue. It is much harder students.

DG: Absolutely, it's nonsense. Absolute nonsense. Look at teenage kids; they're in high school. When you're 17 years old you're supposed to be going to school and you're supposed to spend all your time thinking about teenage stuff and suddenly you're in lockdown and you're not able to do anything anymore. Kids aren't built for that. It's really unfair that this is how it's works. I'm not saying that the government could have done anything different, I mean I don't know. Because I think that right now, we're in a situation with these measures where it's like a Jenga tower and you're trying to figure out *'if we open up universities that's pulling this block out, is that going to be the block that brings down the whole tower?'*. We don't know. I don't think the government has any evil intent, there's no evil

conspiracy, but they don't know what they're doing because nobody who knows what they're doing. We've never done this before.

DS: Exactly and that's always something that I also like to try to make clear to people; you have to understand, and of course with some of the choices that they make I'm doubtful, but with the majority of them why don't you go lead the country? Why don't you go sit where Mark Rutte is sitting? He doesn't know what he's doing because nobody knows what they're doing. The only criticism I have on our Prime Minister is maybe listen a bit more to the actual data instead of the scare tactics.

DG: Yeah, absolutely. We could go down that rabbit hole but one way or another, I do think I do think young people and students are disproportionately being shafted and it isn't fair. So, I recognize the frustration that students have, I really do, and I think that part of where things get problematic in terms of addressing them is again a question of perception. I think that maybe we don't do the best job always of showing them that we know that. I also think that some of that has to do with the fact that, while it is disproportionately unfair to them, they don't always see what effort is being made on their behalf. I don't think that a lot of ES students have any idea how hard we've been working this past year. Not to be like *'woe is me'*, but I worked 12 to 16 hours a day, six days a week for the first six months of this pandemic. Students don't really see that, and I think that's always a natural thing. I speak to colleagues about this all the time that in this business – you've had intercultural communication; you know that the message that you send isn't always the one that you receive – and like just to be critical of myself. My attitude is that I'm going to do everything I can to give students some structure. So, I make sure that the course is set up and I send them lots of emails and tell them *'Okay, make sure that you're in class at this time, make your work, this is due at this time'*, and I kind of thought that it really would come across in a good way. I thought students would see *'Okay, I have structure, I know what I need to do and when I can plan my time around that'* but to some students it came across more like a lack of empathy. Like I didn't care about what they were going through which was absolutely not the case, but it was how they experienced it. And that's a hard lesson to learn and a tricky one, because as a teacher I'm still trying to figure out how do I strike the right balance. I think what also happens with the complaints is, for example, in one of these surveys I saw there was a complaint about me and how I deal complaints. Somebody said that I don't show mutual respect to students when they complain. I supposedly say that it's their fault or that they're lazy or stupid. I have never done that; I've never said a student was lazy or stupid. Lazy might have been true in some cases, but I've never said it. But I think what happens is that my approach is always very much to listen; *'I*

understand your frustration, however the rules are like this for this reason and my advice to you is to do X'. And then I think okay, I'm showing you you've been heard and I'm giving you what you need, you know, my advice on what action to take differently.

DS: Yeah, and I want to interject on that, because that's a funny thing you say that, and I also think it tracks back to the whole unrealistic expectation thing. What I notice in a lot of people who are the same age as I am is that when they complain, they expect a *'Oh yeah you're absolutely right I apologize'*. They often don't expect *'Yes, but have you also considered it from this point of view, have you also considered it from this perspective'* and this is stuff that you just have to learn when you're young. And sometimes it is going to take a strict teacher to point you into that direction and sometimes you won't like it but it's the way that you're going to learn. Because, just to come back to an earlier point, nobody is going to give it to you when you're out of university. You're going to have to prove yourself, you're going to become a wheel in the and if you want to be that as unique as you believe you are, you're going to have to prove yourself. I do agree with you on a lot of the things, but I have to say that in the results from the questionnaire there were some responses of students saying that structural empathy lacks within the faculty rather than with teachers. They actually get more empathy from teachers, which I think is a very positive thing because I always found my support network basically in teachers, rather than the actual faculty of the university. You, for example, have been someone that I had the chance to talk a lot to about my issues and the same goes for Mrs. Foy-Tervoort and Ms. Dohmen. So, I think it's a positive thing to see that students do see that the empathy is present in teachers and I can understand, also because of personal experiences that the empathy seems to lack in within the faculty. Especially the exam board proves to be a huge obstacle for a lot of students.

DG: Yeah, I feel you and I do think that's also an area where, I would always say, it's a problem on both ends. Nobody is doing this perfectly but what happens is, because I know my colleagues and I know that exam board basically has the hardest job. I know all the members of the exam board really well and I know them in a very different context from students, so when students talk about them being very cold hearted or whatever, that always kind of hits me because I know they're not. I know that they want the best outcome for every student, they really do, but they have this responsibility, and this is where expectation management is always a problem in education. And when it comes to dealing with student stress, we always run into this exact problem and I give you a couple of examples, but their job is to make sure that your diploma is beyond question. If you go apply for a job next year

nobody's going to say, *'oh European studies, I read in the paper that everything's off over there'*. They have to make sure that the rules are always followed to a T. And they do that, it sounds like such a nonsense thing to say to students, but it is the truth they're doing it for you. They're doing it to protect you and they have to try to be as impartial as possible and that's very difficult. What ends up happening is if you work for the exam board, or even a lot of other offices, I have a lot of colleagues that will be standing at their door and they have to tell a student *'I don't have time right now'* and they close the door. The thing is, I know everybody I work with really cares about students and they really want to help, but what we all have to remember – and I had to learn this lesson too – is that sometimes you have to take the extra 30 seconds to say *'I can see that you're upset, and this is really important to me, but I cannot help you right now. I would really like it if you would come back tomorrow at 10 when I can give you my full attention, because I can't give you my full attention right now and your problem deserves it'*. Sometimes it's a question of showing colleagues and I try to minister colleagues on that that's what is necessary, and it also is a thing that you have to apply to yourself. I know that sometimes if the exam board doesn't shut the door in people's faces they will never get their work done. So, it's got to go a bit like; the trick is to try to find a way to make both parties aware. I learned this lesson with email; I get a lot of emails and I went through this long phase where I try to answer my emails right away. I don't wait three business days if it takes 3 hours, that's usually rare. But to do that at a point in my career, I made sacrifices, so I would write an email, but I would be the guy in the meme where the guy writes 4 paragraphs to the teacher and the teacher writes back *'sure'*. That was me, I would do that, and I thought that students would value this because I thought students would be so pleased with getting an answer so quickly. That I was really serving them well and the brevity I justified by saying *'Well, I'm trying to answer 100 emails a day here. If I do it this fast then they'll appreciate that'*. I answered quickly and I did this until someone pointed it out to me that students actually felt I was being dismissive, like I couldn't care. That was absolutely not my intention, but I had to learn that lesson. I still don't write long emails, but I try to sound less dismissive. Those are the things that are on the institutional end, you've got to try to be more, and I hate to use the term, but customer friendly. I think that students seeing themselves as customers is a big part of the problem, but a little bit more customer friendliness on the part of the institution would be great. Also, a greater and more adult awareness of your own responsibility is necessary too. I really don't know how to get people there, because just to give you a completely different example, I do the intro week and all the promotion of ES. When you apply for the programme within two weeks you get an email from me *'Thanks for choosing European Studies!'* and then whenever there's news, I send you an update like next week I'm going to start a WhatsApp group for the incoming students and I'll send

them an email to say *'Hey, we got a WhatsApp group. Check it out!'*. Then as the intro is coming, I send packets of information about the introduction week, where to be, what time, and everything. And a lot of kids don't read this yet, they don't check their email and then they contact me in summer vacation, while I'm at Disneyland, *'I never received any information this is very unprofessional'*, or sometimes even mothers who call me and email me. I always write back, and I ask them politely to check their children's spam filter, because our records show that we sent their information packets on the 14th of May, the 30th of May, the 1st of June, and the 10th of July, so please check that. Obviously, they do because I never hear from them again. But not one of them writes back and apologizes, and that realization has to happen, and I don't know how we get to that. Part of the problem is that we are made to feel like you're a customer.

DS: Absolutely, you often can't really email back and say *'hey, thanks no problem'* or something, because then you're going to acknowledge it as a problem. no that's true yeah I think that's

DG: Because you worry about deterring them.

DS: Yeah, I can see a lot of truth in that, absolutely. I personally think that I don't know, I think students are a very sensitive group in a lot of different perspectives. For example, from the perspective of that this is definitely one of the hardest times to be a student, with the loan system, what the labour market is going to look like after you're done studying. It's increasingly competitive and whatnot, but I do think with progress of technological advancement [smartphones, social media, etc.], I do think that it has caused a lot of people from younger generations to gain an inaccurate perspective of themselves. When I were a kid and I would, for example, push another kid, their mom would be 'allowed' to discipline me. Nowadays, when you tell off another person's kind, the parent of that child will be insanely mad at you, because their kid can do no wrong. And I think that's indeed the biggest issue. But to come back to the questions, about mental health issues among students – which a lot of students are dealing with especially now during the COVID-crisis – but are there any initiatives within the European Studies programme that might help students with this besides student counsellors, psychologists, and supervisors? For example, courses, support groups or other initiatives?

DG: Between students there's not a lot for mental health specifically. There is, of course, the structure of the ECA, reference to the dean, and the psychologists. I personally direct a lot of people, I'm probably the number one referral service for psychologists in The Hague at this point because I like to

make people go to therapy if I can. But the programme recently started this new support team that these higher year ES students, who are sort of there to help students and teachers, but specifically with mental health. What's tricky is that the privacy laws are such that a lot of the times we just don't know and not everyone is as comfortable talking about mental health. I am, because I got mental health problems, and I've had a lot of experiences in my life that have helped me to understand what it is to be depressed and what it is to suffer from anxiety and all that type of stuff. So, because I have that baggage I can identify it sometimes, but all I can really do is try to drop subtle hints that someone can come and talk to me, and occasionally I'll ask a kid if they're okay. But it's hard, because sometimes you might know something about someone, but you're not supposed to know, you know? You might have a thought in your head that this person got mental health issues, but you're not allowed to know their business. So, if you've been to the dean because you're bipolar, no one tells me unless you do, and that's the tricky part. You have got to ask for help otherwise I don't know that you need it. I mean I can try, and you could argue that maybe a recommendation you could make is that teachers should be better trained in identifying mental health problems. I think that if we had the skills, there are some things that could be done. To give you a completely different example, once or twice in my career I've had young women in my class that I was pretty sure had eating disorders.

DS: And that is a very sensitive topic of course.

DG: Yes, and it really bothered me because I was never sure how to handle it. I remember I was looking at this girl in my class and I thought to myself '*this is not good*', but do I have the right to say something? Especially because I would be a male teacher looking at her body, which is inappropriate in every way, and I mean, I was noticing her arms but if would '*say you look awfully thin*', that's not going to end well. So, there are things where there was a case where I learned, I think that was earlier in my career, I think if I ran into it now, I would take more steps. There was a situation once where it was apparent to me and I went and I spoke with the ECA and we got lucky because the family was already taking steps, but otherwise I would have said something. The university does have, it's not directly related to this, but it could present something for your recommendations; the University has an e-learning module about *concerning behaviour*, and I can't remember who put it together, but I might be able to put you in touch with them, but somebody has connected you with OKC right?

DS: Yes, I have an interview with someone from OKC next week.

DG: I think that very few teachers know that this exists, but somewhere on the portal there is a plan, like a diagram, and their video trainings help you to identify concerning behaviour, the examples they use are kind of linked. Radicalization is one of them, but also self-harm and I think that I can't speak for all my colleagues, but I don't think that a lot of teachers in higher education have all the tools they could use to identify these types of things. I think at least some training in recognizing some of these signs that if someone is, you know, increasingly angry in every political discussion and seem to be communicating extreme right-wing ideas, you don't necessarily want to jump to conclusions about that student, but you may need to have a meeting. You may need to have a talk with them and the same could be said, I think, maybe for identifying mental health problems. But there would need to be a very serious protocol on that it also respects privacy. A teacher needs to be able to feel comfortable saying *'Hey Dave, I notice that you seem really up some days and really down some days like what's going on, is there an issue have you been to a psychologist? Can I help you find a psychologist?'*, and I got to be able to do that in a way that doesn't make you feel like I'm being demeaning, and where you don't have to worry that I'm going to go to somebody else to discuss your problems. I mean, here's a thing that is sort of a side-track, but it's also kind of relevant and it's that there is a lot of attention in Dutch culture right now for the plight of students. It might be lip service, but people are talking about it. I sometimes see all these stories go by and I think *'Okay, but when is somebody going to check on the teachers?'* because I don't think anybody realises how hard this is on us too. There is a lot of love for the nurses, a lot of love for the elementary school teachers, and my wife's an elementary school teacher and she deserves every bit of that love, but it's kind of a year ago in March they said to teach online and then a week later they were like *'Well, they switch to online-only just fine'*, and we were like no this is hard. It's been incredibly difficult, and I don't mind telling you I had a lot of ups and downs with it. I had my own very serious mental health challenges and I think I operated in a crisis mode from March of last year until Christmas. Even in summer vacation I couldn't relax because I actually had a lot of work to do, and it was playing PlayStation during Christmas vacation that helped me find my Zen. I played Red Dead Redemption 2, I've made it and I felt like a million bucks and I think, also just to connect it back though, I think that's part of the issue as well. In terms of, I had a situation the other day I can't get into what it was, but basically some students were a little angry about something some teachers were angry about too and they were kind of angry at each other, but it was really clear to me that they all just had it. They were just done, they were just all done, and it was a misunderstanding that was easy to clear up, but it got out of control because everybody is done.

DS: I think the situation here as well is that tensions are running so high.

DG: Absolutely, and the teachers absolutely have to meet students in the middle, but we've got to find a way to get students to meet them in the middle too, and that's hard. If you look at what a lot of teachers are experiencing, some of them are working to make video lectures and it takes up to 8 hours to make a good one, and no one watches it. Then they see students complain, and they see that students have a petition about not receiving quality education and that they want their money back, and you're like *'I just worked 6 to 8 hours on this'*. And that can really bring you down, so that's not very conducive. I mean at the end of the day the teachers get paid and their grown up so they do need to suck it up, but at the same time you've got to be able to face students and say *'Okay, we recognize your situation but what can we do for you?'*.

DS: I think, especially now that's the difficulty that I'm discovering in doing my research for my dissertation, is everything was already like signed off [research proposal] on before the COVID-crisis became what it is today. I'm already not taking this into account, which is kind of a shame because I can't really go back and change my entire research structure and it's difficult to now take into account teachers as well, because my focus was primarily on stress levels among students; not taking into account any kind of global crisis that would impact us directly. So, I have been trying to find the balance. One thing that I'm thinking of is who knows if we'll find ourselves ever again in a similar situation, and I do think that there needs to be some kind of, and I don't think this is all teachers, absolutely not because I am very well aware that teachers are in the same boat as us students, but I do think there could be something from a university level that can be done to accommodate both teachers and students. I think that's something that needs to be looked at and I think a lot of that needs to come from probably our government, probably some kind of political level. I think that's the big obstacle that we're kind of facing right now; it's a student versus teacher situation, especially now. I do really understand that, and I guess that's kind of the thing that I was afraid of when I was doing the entire research like *'Okay, teachers are also not going to have it easy they are also going to have their obstacles, they're also going to have their things'*. So, I think that, to come back, I think the idea of training teachers in recognizing and dealing with mental health issues would benefit everyone greatly. I think that it would make it so much easier for both the student and the teacher. That's definitely a thing that I found in the research as well, is that the students almost prefer the structural empathy from teachers because they feel, and I'm going based off of what I found and also in the research from the other papers, is that often with student psychologists or student counsellors there

seems to be this disconnect that is more often present in a student-to-teacher relationship. So, it's kind of difficult to really pinpoint the issue, which is of course the reason why I'm writing a recommendation instead of a solution, but I'm definitely thinking of attacking the problem from multiple ends.

DG: I think a lot of what you need to have happen is a broader cultural shift and that's what's really problematic. You mentioned the student loan system, for example. As an example of an idea that when they rolled it out, it actually didn't seem like the worst idea because student financing was incredibly expensive, it costs a ton of money and there was so much fraud. I mean, every kid said they lived on their own and really lived with mom and dad, and they were getting just gobs of free money. They were taking, before back when Rutte was State Secretary of Education, that was when they finally cut it. At one point you could get like 11 or unlimited financing for as long as you want, and then they cut it to six years, and then they cut it to five. But what I naively thought with the loans was that the loan system would make kids think harder about what studies to choose because in my experience students who are not successful or not happy in their study, it's largely because they picked the wrong things.

DS: Exactly, for me that's exactly the problem. They have to choose way too soon and I think there needs to be a step in the middle that gives students much more time instead of being 12 or 13 years old being *'I'm just going to decide what the rest of my life is going to be like'*. I mean to me that's unrealistic, that's just too unrealistic.

DG: Yeah, and the university had a project two years ago to try to assist young people and making smarter decisions, but it hasn't really paid off yet. But the thing is, we thought that if kids knew *'Geez, this is going to cost me a lot of money, I should really be sure'*, but that didn't really happen, and I think that the culture never fully adjusted to the idea that it wasn't free money anymore. I think this is something The Netherlands as a culture kind of created, because in a way by trying to be helpful to everyone, they made people helpless. I mean like what I find amazing, for example, like as soon as each of my children were born I opened a bank account for them and that is to pay for whatever they need. For when they study or, I'm actually hoping not to need it for their study as I'm hoping I can pay for their studies and then have that money to help them get started, but with so many young people, their parents didn't save any money for them and their parents sort of expected that the government would take care of it. What I find really amazing, and again I don't like to get into a situation where I

tell other people how to raise their kids, but I know that there are a lot of students who borrow the maximum amount even though they don't need it. I don't understand why their parents are letting that happen because I won't let my children borrow money when they study, I won't have it. My oldest is 11 and we already talked about this you are not borrowing money and I see it, not the stereotype or to be negative about students, but I see kids that I know that loan the maximum amount walking around in Canada goose jackets. I think someone should have told you this isn't realistic, and it's not realistic to expect that you can spend six week in Bali every summer and still have enough money to get by.

DS: To be completely honest, I am currently loaning the maximum amount and I've done it my entire studies so I could focus as much on my studies as possible and not work five days a night or five days a week, next to my studies. Did it help? That's questionable, but I don't understand how that's possible. I rarely buy new clothes, for example. The thing I spend money on is things to make myself happy like going out for dinner once in a while, go out for a drink every now and then, like the stuff that you actually need to feel happy. I can safely say I really need the maximum amount of money because I don't want to work six days a week and then also take eight years to just finish one studies. It's very difficult to see the fine line that there is between the people that actually need the amount of money and people that use it just so they can live a fancier life. I mean, I don't understand why you would loan a 1000 euros a month and then spend it on a coat of 700 euros.

DG: This is exactly sort of my point though. The thing is, you can't blame a kid for being spoiled or making not so smart decisions. You have got to blame the person that spoiled them or didn't teach them to make better decisions and that's not just their parents. That is sort of the culture at large. It was part of Dutch culture forever to just take your time studying and chill and take that free money from the government. That was a good, well intended programme that made education accessible to everybody, but I think that somewhere in there, something is really going wrong with that management of expectations. What is a realistic lifestyle for a student? What is studying really like? How much responsibility are you expected to take? That is one of the trickier things to do and with the online learning and whatnot, you see that as well. That they're just not quite ready for that level of responsibility and because they've been given the vibe that in this consumer culture to see themselves as customers, *'I pay a lot of money for this study and therefore I'm entitled to X'*. This isn't very helpful, it's a bit risky. I mean, there's lots of other things you can say, we also kind of solicit that negativity. These kids have all gotten six surveys in the last three months about their wellbeing, you

know, it's no wonder they're going to be negative if you're asking every five minutes if you're doing a good job. I think that the thing that needs to happen is to find a way to encourage more adult behaviour without being a jerk, and I have never figured out exactly how to do that.

DS: It's still actually one of the questions that I also had. Because the questions that I had in my questionnaire were formulated from a first-person perspective and not *'the university does this, the university does that'*, because I don't want to pin all the negativity on the university or the study programme. Because if you ask it from a first-person perspective, people really have to think *'do I identify with the statement?'*. And, based on the results of my questionnaire the majority of the respondents admitted to having difficulties with time management. So, I was actually wondering; are there courses or initiatives or programmes within ES, within the faculty or university that can help students basically become a better adult, basically prepare them?

DG: Time management does come up in in the ECA-programme in the first year. How effectively, I can't say because I haven't been an ECA'er in a very long time. The school psychologists offer trainings which I believe also include time management. They also have trainings on studying with anxiety or with ADHD., but perhaps more structural training on that could be helpful.

DS: That's actually one of the starting points that I had in my mind; to offer more free trainings or opportunities to deal with stress and other things. Students apparently also felt like, if there are, it's not properly advertised. So, I think there's also maybe a communication issue.

DG: Definitely true, but then again, the advertising thing is also a complex thing. Because one of the sad truths is that it's so hard to reach students, to get their attention for anything. They don't read emails, they don't go to the student portal, they don't read what's on blackboard, they don't even read the course manual a lot of the time. The Facebook group is dying, nobody really uses it anymore. It's really sad, although, I don't get called a fascist nearly as often anymore, so that's nice for me. You know, every time I have to take down a post I get accused of being a fascist. It's not fun, but I miss things from the first days when that thing was good, though, because I think it provided something that, because a lot of the problems are community problems right, the feeling of community, and that was a place where you could kind of create that. You can't do what we did there on Instagram or other platforms, it just doesn't work on other platforms. But seeing that thing die is really sad because I started it. I remember it when it took forever for it to become successful, to really be a thing and then for a while it was really awesome and lots of fun and then there were negative moments, but now it's

just kind of slowly dying and that bums me out. But anyway, part of the problem is that if I have an important announcement I put it on the portal, put on blackboard, I put it on Facebook, I sent it around. And even then, I can't really reach students so with that said, I mean the student portal is a mess, of miserable design. It is so unnavigable; it's no wonder students don't even try to find stuff. I think what I would also recommend, because I think there are a lot of initiatives out there, student initiatives, programme initiatives, and I think that students don't really try hard enough to find out about them. But the university could definitely make it easier to locate it. You got teachers that will tell you that it's on Blackboard, but if you ask that teacher they probably couldn't show you either. That's a problem and making sure that it is more statically spread.

DS: Yeah, so even teachers have difficulties with the student portal or blackboard.

DG: Oh yeah, god. Do you know how often I have a teacher come to me and be like my students can't find X on Blackboard which really means I don't know how to find X on Blackboard.

DS: I think the thing that still frustrates me the most about Blackboard is when I go to courses, I type in the course that I need, I get 20 results, and none of them is the one that I'm looking for.

DG: Yeah, you need the one with the current year. I know, it's a drag. That's a whole thing, like back in the day we used to just do one course for each semester, but that wasn't allowed anymore because the courses were huge. A Blackboard course isn't allowed to be more than two gigs [Gigabytes] or the system can't handle it and these courses were like 20 gigs. So, every course has to have its own Blackboard course and as has to be archived for legal reasons, but it's a good definition of how a lot of processes at this university, not to tear down the university because I've worked here for 13 years and I love this place and I think that everybody here has the best intentions, but sometimes there's nothing as dangerous as a bunch of highly educated people with good intentions. A lot of processes and information systems are designed to meet the needs of the organization, but not the needs of the user, and that means the student and the teacher. They're not designed for the user at all. When they think at top level about a new procedure for putting grades into Osiris or something, they don't think about the teacher that is going to have to do this complicated process for 67 students in one day. It doesn't compute with them. And they don't mean to make it something so needlessly complicated, but it just happens. One of my favourite stories about working here is that about ten years ago, when we got our first smartboards. Before that, all the rooms had whiteboards in them and one day they

came in and they put in the smartboards. But as they did they ripped out all the whiteboards and threw them away and they're like we don't need whiteboards anymore because we have smartboards. The thing is, sometimes I just want to write on the wall. To use the smartboard, I have to turn it on, wait ten minutes, turn on the Windows PC, wait another ten minutes. I then have to calibrate it because it was never lined up and there were never any pens. They managed to take the simplest thing in the world, writing on the wall, and they made it complicated.

DS: I think it's definitely one of the funniest things when I came here. I mean, I was I was in still in high school when they started to implement the changes like getting the smartboards and the struggle every time we came into a classroom at THUAS and trying to locate a pen, trying to pinpoint why the HDMI is not plugged in correctly, why it won't even turn on, the teachers that don't understand the login system.

DG: Yeah, they're not equally skilled with it and the systems. I mean in the classrooms, we had in every classroom in this building an HDMI cable and VGA cable and every laptop has either HDMI or VGA ports and you could go and in plug in and present. But last year they ripped them all out and they replaced them with this display link system, which they think is really fancy, and has a USB. To use it, you have to install software on your computer and if you use a Mac every time there's an update it doesn't work anymore. Take guest speakers, the guest speaker has to install software on their computer that they might not want. It's another that there should be greater attention to the user experience, and particularly the student experience, and that goes I think for everything from how you design your IT structure, but also to how you design your curriculum. Going back to something I hinted at earlier before which I never came back to; European studies is, I mean I love European studies and I think it's a fantastic programme, I look at what our students do after they graduate and it blows my mind, but it's not a perfect programme. It's got things that it could improve on and one thing that always strikes me about ES is that is needlessly complicated. We have a lot of ambitions for our students and that's great, but like when I was a student, when I was in college, when I was your age, I had four courses a semester. Four hours of each course per semester, so I had 16 hours of class a week and that was it. I had those four courses, and I might have four exams or two exams and two essays, and that was it. If I look at what our students are doing in the first year there are times when people have ten or 11 different things going on. Each of them has multiple assessments in it and all of that stuff. Again, the sum total of good expectations; every teacher wants to the best possible job, making sure you learn that Spanish or whatever. So, how do we do that? Well, we test you halfway

through and test you at the end. Makes sense on the microlevel, it makes total sense. It's the best way to teach the Spanish and make sure that you get where you're going.

DS: If you only have two other courses.

DG: Yeah, but if you're only doing Spanish and culture, that's fine. But if you do Spanish, and culture, and research skills, and Spanish practicals, and you got to go to your ECA hour, and you've got to learn that APA-style referencing, and this and that, it gets to be a lot. There are so many individuals, and this is something the programme knows, and the programme is working, using a new curriculum, and one of the main goals is reduce the number of assessments. Up until now, ES has definitely been a programme where you fall behind once is really hard to catch up and we do recognize that, we are working on it.

DS: From a student's perspective, who was now spend *six long years* in these studies, I got to say, my key point – especially why I'm so fed up with it – in the end is, and I really think it's an interesting programme and I think it has so much potential, but overly complicated interdisciplinary part after you choose your specialization. I think this is something that I heard a lot of my peers talk about as well, is *'Okay, I choose private and yet I still have to do 20 public courses'* or someone chooses public, yet still has to do ten private courses. There is no real, and I think it's good to a certain extent to still have that interdisciplinary factor in it, but I do think if you choose to do this specialization why would you still do courses for the other one.

DG: Well, I think that's also expectation management problem and that's something where we as the programme have failed, it has failed repeatedly. I think that the specialization thing is oversold, I prefer to use the term customization to say that you're doing an interdisciplinary studies. When I took over doing the open days and all the promotions in 2016, ever since then I'm very careful in how I explain this. I say, *'Okay, you're going to learn about all the way through, but you get to specify which one you want to focus on a little bit more'*. One of the areas where I think we also failed was that we didn't really make it properly clear to students that the specialization is a choice that you make, and it is only worth 15 credits. But when you go on exchange, you get to pick your courses, and when you come back you pick your minor, and you get to pick what kind of internship you're going to do, and what kind of graduation project and all of that. It is really fantastic opportunity to customize your degree completely if *you're aware of it*.

DS: Exactly, and that's definitely something that I was aware of very early on and that's why, because whenever I asked teachers what I can become as a European Professional, they gave me a long lists of things I could do after I graduated. So, I noticed after a bit *'If I don't choose my electives correctly, my minor correctly, and my courses on my exchange correctly, I'm going to end up with such a broad foundation of knowledge no one is going to hire me because I will be educated very superficially in a lot of different areas'*. So, I focused on what I wanted to do, which was marketing, and I want to have some kind of extension to that marketing, and I noticed that this definitely helped me. I think it might actually be a very good idea to maybe advertise this more in the earlier years. Maybe in the first year and the second year; *be smart about the electives that you choose so you can create your own path*.

DG: Indeed, we have been making a lot of effort on that, but I think that it's one of these things that goes wrong because of something that happens to both students and teachers at ES. One of the fun facts; we did our accreditation last semester and the students participated in a panel and afterwards they told us what they were talking about. They were mostly third year students and one of them was saying that they asked them about their careers and none of them really knew what kind of career they could have, and this was of course not good for us on the accreditation. But I was having a conversation with them and I was telling them about the funniest thing. One of the funniest things about my job is that I experienced this every year, I do a survey on all incoming students. You apply for European studies and we ask you to fill in this survey, it's so we can evaluate our marketing and also it's about expectation management because the survey helps you decide if the program is a good fit. So, we ask you questions like *'There's a ton of group work at European studies how you feel about group work?'*, and we do that partly so that you can decide for yourself if the program is right for you. But also, so that there can't be any complaining later that there was group work, because you were told there would be. We ask the students every year about why they picked a programme, what their interests are, what their career goals are, and what kind of career they think they can have from European Studies. And what we see every single time is that they get it. Students have a very clear idea of what this is and what they're going to be before they start, but as soon as school starts you ask those same kids six weeks later they don't have a single clue and it's because it gets lost in the day-to-day Blackboard and APA-style stuff, and the teachers too are trying to keep up and it's really hard to see the big picture.

DS: From my perspective there is so much focus on the small details that the bigger picture often is forgotten. The bigger picture of you starting your studies, you want to finish it in this amount of time, then you want to start your life. And there's so much focus on do you use the APA-style correctly, do you do this correctly, are you sure you got all the forms in check? It needs to be more streamlined, maybe like a timeline or something will help. I think it is also, for example, when you want to re-sit the course from two years ago that you have to check like ten different Excel sheets if it's still offered, if it's still done. There is so much that needs to be straightened and I think it's that's both because, the ES programme is a relatively young programme of course, I think that's on one hand a good thing because it can get a lot of feedback so it can change, it can evolve itself, but it's also if you're too set in your ways from early on then it's very difficult to change things as they go along. I think that's definitely something that I have noticed in the ES programme that it's something that, I don't know how to explain it properly, but I think you get what I'm trying to say.

DG: I feel you; I think your idea of a timeline is a good one. I think some kind of visual tool, and it's something that people have talked about especially because we're redesigning the curriculum, but a way of just visualizing *'this is the journey that I'm on and these are the steps that I have to take'*, and not a checklist in a negative sense like checking off boxes, but more like this is the thing that still needs to be done. It makes me think of when I was an ECA'er a long time ago. I was an ECA'er for the three-year programme for two classes and in those days I was their supervisor for three straight years. I did ECA for about four years I think in total and in those days as an ES student you had to make a portfolio on Blackboard and that was your ECA development portfolio, and you had to add stuff to it as you went and then at the end of the programme you also had to meet with your ECA'er and do like a final assessment. It was discontinued because it was very flawed and the Blackboard portfolio thing wasn't very good, but I think the idea or the principle behind it is a sound one.

DS: Yes, it does sound like a good idea, because not only do you have someone else that can guide you through the process, but you still have a much clearer sense of what is expected of you and what you can expect of yourself, and this and that is what needs to be done to achieve the goal. I think that might be a very good one, especially to start with from early on.

DG: Especially for teachers, I think the teachers they don't always, God love them, but they don't always have the big picture in their mind either because it's just so hard to keep up. I mean, so many of these little changes you're talking about, no one can keep up with them anymore.

DS: For students it's already so intimidating and confusing, I cannot imagine what it is to be working within such a programme and then having to constantly shift and change. It's a difficult environment, it is a challenging environment and I do fully believe that it's not only difficult for the students.

DG: Yeah, but as I always say to my colleagues if you want to complain about students not reading stuff or not looking stuff up, you got to make sure it's easy to find first, you know what I mean? You notice what I try to do if you actually study the way I react to a lot of the Facebook stuff, I almost never tell someone the answer to their question directly.

DS: Yes, I actually noticed that a long time ago.

DG: And I don't do that to be a jerk, I do that to make people take that responsibility. Some people never take the hint. There are just some students who never look anything up and they're just *'Does anyone know X?'*, and you want to say, *'Okay, you really should go here and look that up'* but you got to make sure that it is actually easy to find and easy to understand.

DS: Yeah absolutely. So, there are three questions that I really want to get to, although there's a lot of stuff that has already been answered. The questions include:

- Are there classes to prepare students to compete in the international labour market? Do they do they exist?
- The demands and expectations that exist within the ES-system. For example, the credits, courses, tests, competences, etc. I think we already kind of covered quite a lot of this.
- And lastly, how important, especially this one because this is definitely something that I've seen that students feel this pressure, is it to graduate without delay? This is definitely also apparent in the research that I've done, and I think this is definitely empowered by the fact that we have to loan money to be able to pay for tuition. So, how important is it to the European Studies programme to graduate without delay? Are there certain motivations for this, for example because of financial reasons? Or is it because they just want to have students graduate as quickly as possible?

DG: It's not just financial, but the way that the Dutch fund universities is really bizarre, alright. I don't understand all the details of how it works, but what I do know is that first of all, there's a lot of talk and the word that used to be used a lot was *return*. That's not a European Studies thing, that's how

universities are evaluated. The government gives us a certain amount of money per kid, you know, because you guys think you pay a lot, but what you're actually paying is essentially a tip. You pay like, I'd rather you just gave it straight to me, you pay 2100 bucks. Your education really costs about 1100 to 1400, and the government kicks in the rest. There's a funding per student and the funding is affected by certain factors, directly and indirectly. One of them is how many people get their propaedeutic diploma on time, how many people finished the first year on time. There are agreements with the ministry, and the ministry wants a certain amount of return. The same ministry wants quality and high standards, so the government wants you to have high standards, but they also want everybody to pass which is really quite difficult to balance. They say, and every new politician, every new head of the university says, *'we're going to be tough we're going to make the first year selective, we're going to cut the wheat from the chaff by having high standards'*. And then when we find out, oh damn, we're in trouble because only 30% got their P [propaedeutic diploma]. What happens is that it's frowned upon to have students not get their P on time, but it's also frowned upon to have what's called a *dropout rate*, which is a really tricky thing. I always get the question of what our dropout rate is, and I have to explain there's no such thing. What Dutch universities do and *StudieKeuze1, 2 and 3* and the *KeuzeGids* do is they count how many kids are in year two in September. And then they'll go *'Okay, so there's 200 kids in year two. Now last year on the 1st of October, you had 400 kids and you only have 200 now. So, your dropout rate is 50% because you lost 200 kids'*. Those are not real numbers, by the way, but there is no such thing as a dropout rate. First of all, you get kids who, like we discussed earlier, they picked the wrong study and they decided it was the wrong thing very quickly and they leave. And they account for a huge number of the so-called *dropouts*, they are the people who quit in two weeks with zero to 10 points max. You have those people who realize in February that they're not going to have enough points and they quit so that they don't have to pay the money back. And then you have the kids who don't have enough points at the end of the year and get asked to leave. And then you also have the kids who get their propaedeutic diploma and say they've heard everything is better at Leiden so they're going to go there, and all of those kids are counted as dropouts – which is a real drag. But anyway, when it comes to graduating the Bachelor phase, it's like I've heard students say even on our Facebook *'Oh they love it when you have a delay, so you keep paying money'*. No, you might be paying money but we're not seeing it. At a certain point, like if you go into fifth year we still get some money for you, but it's a little less but at a certain point, I don't know if it's year six or seven or eight, we stop getting paid for you. Everything we do for you after a certain point, we're doing for free. But on top of that, there's the fact that the statistics on who graduates on time and who doesn't, and who gets their P on time who does, those statistics are used against us. So, even though you want

to say we have high standards, people judge you because too many kids flunk out in the first year or too many kids have a study delay. And so, there is pressure to get people out on time. That said, I know I try really hard to encourage people to do it only insofar as it's possible within their physical and mental health. I can't tell you how many times I've had a conversation with somebody where I had to explain to them nobody really cares if it took you an extra six months, like no one cares, no one is going to judge you for it you know. I've had students with significant delays, like 8 years, who were like what do I say if they notice it on my CV. First of all, most of them are too lazy to do the math. They're probably not even going to look. If they ask you about it, you just say *'I had a lot happening when I was studying, I had some issues to go through. It took me a little longer than most people to figure out exactly what I wanted, but now that I know exactly what I want, and I've got the skills and knowledge I need. I'm ready to come to work for you'*.

DS: Absolutely, and I also think it's a very rude question, because actually during my interview for my internship thing they actually asked me why I was in my sixth year and I'm like that's none of your business, that's actually none of your business, but of course you're not going to say that in an interview because you want them to like you.

DG: You're right, but you should still flip it round because it's an opportunity to sell yourself more and say *'No, I went I went through something and I came out 100 times stronger'* or it can be, I always advised to go with the *'It took me a little while to figure out exactly what I wanted, but once I figured it out, I got my eyes to work'*. But yeah, that fear I think plays a role with some students. I see it with students on every level, like early in the programme. Sometimes I deal with students who are used to getting good grades and then don't get a good grade from me and it really doesn't land. There really is a moment where it's like that they I think I am mean to them or I don't like them. No, you're works not quite up to standards you know, it's not in high school anymore. I think that's teaching students to prepare for failure and to learn that failure is also a teaching tool is also a tricky thing. Because at the end of the day, nobody really wants to learn anything. Nobody wants to learn stuff we just want to be good at stuff.

DS: I think it's also a very selective area in which you want to learn because I know that I want to learn about a lot of things, but that's just literally theoretical stuff. But when you start talking about very specific stuff, you want to be good at it from the get-go.

DG: Yeah, and that's very human and it's one of the things that I think, I don't want to say that my overall narrative is that students are a bit too spoiled, but it is kind of sort of true in that they are not as used to constructive feedback. So, they experience it quite differently and because they're used to being micromanaged at high school they run into problems, and when they run into a brick wall it's easier to say is the programme's fault then to self-reflect.

DS: This is definitely something we mentioned earlier. I think nowadays it's very difficult because I had to realize that self-reflection is a thing and I am happy that I learned it very early on, especially during my gap year at the Tax and Customs Office, which is a very conservative work environment. I think it's actually very advisable for students to take a gap year and really work at a certain company or certain organization, so you actually have to deal with such environments – environments where you aren't priority number one.

DG: I think you're right. I think that everybody should do a gap year at work.

DS: And people should also not be taking it in a way that you're not special, because everybody is special in their own way, but you also have to be realistic.

DG: You actually remind me of a colleague who always wanted to push for more internships in every year and I think there is something to be said for that. More of that professional experience helps them to put things in perspective. It's like, you struggle to find the context for what you're learning. When I go to the placement return day, which is one of my favourite things to do, because students will be talking about the things they do, and I can see the stuff that I taught them against their will come back and they don't even know they learned it from me, but they did! And, you know, they don't come with flowers and candy that's okay, because I can see it come back and that's great. I think that the placement return day is one of my favourite days, it really is. It always restores my faith because sometimes I'll be desperate like these kids are not learning anything and then I see it there and I go '*Okay, fine it's alright*', but I wanted to make it mandatory for all the first-year students to go to that day to be reminded of that because, so we made it optional, and we invited them a couple of times and no one came. That's one of those things where it's like students often say on surveys that we don't do enough to show them their career perspectives, but Anneke Schuurmans is inviting alumni every other week to come and give a presentation, and people don't come. That comes back again to like how the culture has sort of failed to instil the right expectations of responsibility, and that's not to say

that the teachers are exempt from their responsibility to do a better job managing these things, helping identify the stress or the mental health problems and all of that, but this country has really strange expectations.

DS: Yes, I agree with you on that one. I think it's also, when I think about the things that you're saying now from a student perspective and being a student at European studies, there are a lot of alumni that come to speak, and I don't think a lot of students realize that it's basically an opportunity for them to have a look into the future. To have that little window to peek through, you know, so they can see for themselves what they can accomplish. I think a lot of students think it's just another person that's going to tell us how it is, and how you have to behave, and how you have to do. I think maybe if there is a certain drive or certain motivational factor that we can provide students with if you don't have a sense of what the hell you're doing here please do come, because they can actually tell you why you're studying this.

DG: I think that's a big key thing for a lot of the initiatives that you're going to come up with because I think that the mandatory character of these things is problematic. Let's say we're going to put together regular sessions to check in on everybody's mental health, we're going to bring in every class and we're going to talk about our feelings. Some of the kids will be into it and some of the kids will be like *'You want me to come and talk about my feelings and my spirit animal with you? I don't think so'*. It's hard to take it seriously because it just feels so forced on them, but I mean like I said, if I had a magic bullet I would have used it by now, because it's tricky. I think that it's so many different problems and, to come back to the culture, a completely different example, but related. I don't know if you saw that there was some drama on the Facebook group because somebody saw this research about your start position on the labour market?

DS: Yeah, I think so. It does ring a bell somewhere.

DG: Okay, short version; Elsevier every year writes an issue called *'Wat is je studie waard?'*; What is your study worth? And they measure your starting position. And this year it was in the news because the UWV had written its own report on starting positions on the labour market for hbo-student and they just lifted all the data from Elsevier. So, a student posted that she was kind of like what the hell, you know. The whole thing where people say we were catfished, we were lied to and I was taking it personally because I'm the guy who sold the programme. I always have to have this discussion with

them, I said *'Okay guys, I taught you research skills. What did I try to teach you about when you hear a conclusion like this?'*, because ES ranked near the bottom in starting position on the labour market, near the bottom. It just barely ranked above dance, and this was very hurtful to see, and the students, logically, they freaked out. They were like *'Oh my God we're so screwed'*. But you have to ask the question how did they measure it? And how they measure it for that specific piece of research is bizarre. They go to CBS, they get data on people who graduated a year and a half ago, and they measured how many of them had a permanent contract and a good salary within one year, which is completely unrealistic for 95% of the job fields out there. If you get that report, and read it, and you look at the top 20 best positions; of the top ten, nine are either primary or secondary school education because there's been a shortage there for 20 years. They're the only fields where you can get a permanent contract in a year. The other one was maritime officer. Okay, so if you went to study maritime officer, you'd have a better career prospect. It's just not realistic to believe that you're going to graduate and a week later you're going to have a good job yeah. It's going to take you months, it could take years. It could be that you have to take a lousy job while you're looking for the good job, and that was normal when I graduated from school. But people, and I think I put that on the parents sometimes too, they have very unrealistic expectations. Stuff like that, I think would help, some of the things you're talking about.

DS: I think what also might help, like my mom is very keen on pressuring me in the perspective of making sure that I graduate from at least one bachelor's degree so I'll always have something to fall back on and after that I can do whatever I want. I think that's a very healthy mentality to have; just make sure that you have some kind of basis, some kind of foundation, whether it be communication, whether it be psychology, whether it be European Studies, just make sure that you get what you need and then just see what you want to do. I mean, it's like you said now a couple of times, I do think a lot of the issues do stem from unrealistic expectational patterns from students and that's basically because of what they see online, it's what they see around them, it's what they get thrown at them, so I understand a lot of the points that you're making and what you're trying to say. I think this is also been a very good interview specially to get more organizational background information backing up my dissertation. Because I think, I mean to write a recommendation, I have to understand how everything how everything works but within the faculty.

DG: I wish I understood how everything works.

DS: Okay, well then that's the conclusion, that's going to go into my recommendation.

DG: The thing, I mean, it's not exactly that but it is true that they're trying, and I see so much good effort get lost.

DS: I think it actually will help not only the programme, and I think it's already huge plus for the programme, and I think it will also help the students to understand that the faculty or the programme knows that it's too difficult and it's trying to take the necessary steps to simplify the process. Like I said it's a young programme, it is still very much in development. It's not like psychology that's already been there for since the beginning of time.

DG: Basically, because throughout history, people who don't know what they want to do for living have needed a study, and psychology has met that need. I think I think the simplification of the curriculum is going to be a good thing, I think that the other idea of saying that teacher training needs to focus more on wellbeing and mental health. I wish that earlier in my career I had more tools, because I had to figure out a lot of things. I mean, if you had told me before I became a teacher the kind of issues I would be hearing about in helping students with, I wouldn't have believed you. I've had to talk to people over the years about everything from abortions to schizophrenia, alcoholic parents and all these other things that I wasn't trained for.

DS: I think that's a very good one. I think that would also solve a lot of the issues and especially promoting this. A very small example is now that I'm working at Unilever I have two colleagues who have in their email sign off a banner that they're specialized mental health officers, they're not experts so they can't help you, but they can recognize certain patterns and they can help you in identifying certain issues and what the necessary steps are to actually combat the issue. I think if teachers get this training, and they make it clear from the first day they meet their students, they serving as some sort of steppingstone to improving mental health. I think that would solve so many issues, because I think that's the biggest feedback that not only my credit questionnaire has received, but also the other questionnaires that I have used, is the disconnect or not knowing who to contact. Not knowing the first steps that you need to take, because a lot of people are also reluctant to go to student psychologists and student counsellors because they often tend to be floaty or they don't feel taken seriously.

DG: Right now, it's also because they are in the wrong place if you ask me. The school psychologist office used to be hidden for a reason. It used to be down in what is now the front office before it used

to be the sport and campus office. And it was very big office, and the student psychologist had an office in there. The advantage of it was that anybody can walk in there at any time and never had to worry. I took students down there myself a couple of times to make an appointment and after that it's none of my business. You don't have to talk to me about it, but I'm just going to ask you if you went and they felt fine with that because it was hidden. Later it became more difficult because I would say let's go let's make it a point with school psychologist they preferred not to because other people might see them. That's a legitimate concern, plus they put all the psychologists and the deans right next to each other in one stretch of hallway; I call it the trail of tears. It's like everybody who sad is going to be down there and I think obviously you already know that the psychologists have long waiting lists as well. They're working on that and I frequently just advise students to contact their family doctor and tell them that they have an acute need, because most insurance plans cover at least six visits with the first line psychologist.

DS: I do think the danger with that based they are not going to their family therapist or family doctor because they don't want their family to know that the problems that they're dealing with.

DG: Your doctor can't tell your family. What you tell your doctor is between you and your doctor.

DS: True, but I don't think young kids realize that or actually know what the Hippocratic oath is. I think I'm one of the very rare cases remembers that it was taught to us in high school and in our first year at ES, in cultural dimension. I think they're too scared that it will be talked about with their parents. It's a very difficult topic.

DG: Oh yeah, but I would pursue the user experience thing as well. One of the things that we talked about years ago is, I always had this idea but was never able to pull it off, trying to find a way to help teachers and students walk in each other's shoes and I've never found the right way to do it. Me and some colleagues were talking about doing a simulation where we wanted to bring colleagues in and put them through the student experience, but we never fully designed it, and then to do something similar with students to show them how teachers experience it. To bring them a little bit more together, but I've never figured out how to do that exactly, but a greater awareness of the user experience would help the university and its staff and its students a lot.

DS: Absolutely, I'm going to have to round up a bit here. So, I wanted to ask if there are any thoughts or things that you think might be useful or that might be necessary? Things that need to be implemented. Or do you feel like you've covered everything?

DG: Most of what I can say, I mean I can always say more, but I think I mean you picked a really hard topic. It's so hard because there are so many human factors that are so complicated and that it's incredibly difficult. I think that a lot of this is a socio-cultural problem. A lot of it is the expectations of students, but that we can't say to students to have realistic expectations. We have got to figure out how we're going to help them to adjust those expectations and get the most out of themselves. I don't think we have an answer for that yet and I think that's important and it matters. We can't just complain about it and I think that some responsibility does have to come from them, they do have to step up and be adults, and we can give them the help they ask for, but the other thing is that I think where a lot of people go wrong, where the university sometimes goes wrong, is that they always ask the wrong questions in all these surveys about wellbeing. Asking how someone's wellbeing is, isn't a useful question because everyone will say no. The useful question is what you need from us, tell us what you need, and we will try to see if we can meet that need.

DS: Absolutely, I fully agree with that. I think instead of giving them a question in which they are able to point a finger, give them the opportunity to actually tell why everything is going the way it is. I think that's a very good point, absolutely. Great! I think definitely work with this, especially for the recommendation. I think this information is going to be very helpful. I'm going to stop the recording. Just one last question; is it alright if I mention you by name?

DG: You can call me by name, I haven't said anything that's confidential.

DS: Okay, thanks again so much and I'm going to stop the recording now.

Appendix E – Results: Interview with Fee Romein (Full Transcript)

DS: I am recording this interview for my research. It will not be shared if you do not agree with this. Do I have your consent?

FR: Yes.

DS: Okay thank you. Could you please state your name and your position within THUAS?

FR: Yes. My name is Fee Romein and I am a policy officer for student wellbeing and social security, and I work for the OKC department, in the student services team.

DS: Thank you so much. As I explained before, this is a semi-structured interview that consists out of a few questions. So, let's start with the first question. I already have a bit of an answer on this question, but I would like to know your point of view. Does THUAS measure student wellbeing? If so, how, and how often? If not, why not?

FR: Well, that's a big question. The university currently does not measure student wellbeing at this point in time, or more so on that specific issue. We do have the NSE [National Student Survey] that we conduct annually during spring, in which themes are discussed that have impact on students. From this survey it's clear that supervision and guidance is an important factor for students, especially now during these times. Moreover, among the first years we did the 100 Days survey after they've spent their first 100 days at THUAS, how they're doing and how they're progressing. But I believe that hasn't been done for the past two years. Besides that, I believe that within study programmes there are various smaller studies as well, which we as centralized party don't have a clear overview of. There is also other research among international students like the International Student Barometer, but we have never conducted a research that was solely focussed on wellbeing. Now, after last year there have been more initiatives from within the programmes themselves, especially after a national increase in interest in the topic due to the COVID-crisis. There was a national study conducted by the Trimbos Institution that was focussed on student wellbeing, but THUAS decided not to participate due to multiple reasons. For example, topics that were discussed in it like substance abuse and for THUAS that topic is not relevant at this point in time.

DS: So, this discussed potential alcohol and drugs abuse?

FR: Yes, and besides, the timing of this study was also quite poor, because it was conducted right after the NSE. Meaning, we couldn't really prepare properly and then there was the worry of achieving a desirable response rate. And other universities that we compare ourselves to, that we use as our benchmark, did not participate either. So, there was a list of reasons for us not to participate. It did give us a reason to start our own survey, or at least to create a starting point – that's the phase we're currently in. We are currently looking at other questionnaires from other institutions that research student wellbeing. There are more than enough sources for inspiration that we use, and we also really want to focus on diversity and inclusivity; to what extent a student feels at home. So, we are working on this from a centralized team, collaboration with different lecturers and students, to set up how we are going to do this. We would like to conduct this amongst the second-, third- and fourth-year students, along with the 100 Days survey the first years receive, and we want to do this due to it being easier to promote. Which, in turn, means that we can expect a better response rate. The fall also typically is a time of year during which students experience more complaints, meaning it could give them more encouragement to let us know what we can do for them. So, they can let us know what they need in terms of guidance and other help. I think that might answer your question?

DS: It absolutely did, this is very helpful! To come back on what you said about the coronavirus playing a part in this, is that it's quite difficult to take that into account, especially since my research proposal had been signed off on before the crisis started. So, in my questionnaire, I was not factoring this in, because then the signed-off topic would change. But of course, it will influence the responses. And if I understand correctly, this has also been a motivational factor for THUAS to commence doing their own study?

FR: Yes, there has been a lot of discussions on whether or not we wanted to do this, and these discussions took so long that we decided to focus more on structural research. In principle, the survey we're going to conduct in the fall is a pilot, but if it were up to me, I would perform it annually. The question remains, however, is the response rate sufficient enough? We are currently now looking from multiple angles if there is a demand for this and whether the students are reachable, because we do have a vast variety of options to help students increase their wellbeing, but they don't seem to know where they could find this.

DS: Yes, exactly. This has also been confirmed in my own research, from both my questionnaire as well as my theoretical framework, that, for example, Windesheim, HvA and UvA a lot of students did

not know what kind of guidance or help there was available for them. And the same could be said for support in terms of mental health. So, you have concluded this is the case at THUAS as well?

FR: Yes, actually. We put the information primarily on Student Portal, which is a platform students don't always check. I have to admit that we're pretty stubborn in that regard too, because we think *'Okay, we've put it there, so we've informed them'*. I am currently trying to find out how, in case of students needing help with anything, how we can communicate this clearly, which is step one. Step two is then trying to find out whether the offered help or answer is sufficient enough, which is something that needs to come from a centralized department. Logically, students feel more connected to their study programme or faculty, but it would be unfortunate if all the programmes would offer their own courses in dealing with performance anxiety, or something. It's very complex, but it would be nice if students would know where to find all this information. It would be best even, if there would be a new system that merges Blackboard and Student Portal together, or at least a unification of all the information, but that might not be relevant for your research.

DS: To be honest, this has actually been brought up in my interview with Dave van Ginhoven. We agreed on the fact that Blackboard and the intranet are just too confusing in terms of finding the information that you're looking for. It is actually an interesting point I could raise in the recommendation of my dissertation; to streamline these portals. There was also a point raised by one of the respondents to my survey, which was to create stronger ties with off-campus organisations that might help in dealing with student wellbeing. Especially because a lot of the students have noticed the waiting lists at student psychologists are incredibly long.

FR: We actually have discussed this today. We are actually looking into hiring more freelance psychologists during the peak periods that can be recurrently employed and who are familiar with THUAS. Logically, there is a list of requirements that they have to meet; if you want to work as a student psychologist within THUAS, you have to be familiar with the internal structure and with how to move around within the university. There are indeed a lot of organisations in the area, so we are currently looking at what kind of procedures we can implement to decide with who we want to work with and what kind of criteria these potential partners have to meet in order to be able to refer them. Because, yes, the waiting lists are indeed too long, but financing is quite logically another issue as well. Independent workers are very expensive, and we currently do have five student psychologists, which

is quite a lot if you think about it and adds to the fact that it's surprising that they're under a lot of pressure.

DS: Yes, I can imagine that they must feel pressure, because how many students does THUAS have? My guess is around a couple of thousands?

FR: 26.000 students.

DS: Oh wow, that is indeed a lot.

FR: The five student psychologists that we have don't work full-time either, so it varies from two to four days a week, and they all do five-session trajectories in which the main focus is on students with important academic related problems. And when talking about wellbeing, you also have to consider the family doctor's trajectory, which might also be overlooked at the moment.

DS: Indeed, this was also one comments I received from respondents to my questionnaire, is that student psychologists are often, or it feels as such, more result-driven rather than empathy-driven. One respondent actually mentioned their visit to one of the student psychologists, and how their academic problems were neglected. The psychologist was too focussed on personal issues and advised them to contact their family doctor. There often seems to be a disconnect between the two parties. I of course don't know if this is applicable to other students as well, but I thought it was definitely important to take these two into account.

FR: Yes, it's actually good that you mention it. I also think it might be a bit of an expectation management issue from students. Whenever you go to a psychologist, you don't expect that you only get five sessions about study-related issues.

DS: Precisely. I also do not think a lot of students are aware that this might be a standard procedure, but expectation management amongst students is also a topic I have discussed with Van Ginhoven. Mutual expectations, so also those from students have towards THUAS, it can sometimes be too unrealistic. So, separating the things you'd like to see from the things that could actually be made reality. One of the things I also try to include in my research is trying to find out how open mental health as a topic is within European Studies. Preferably within THUAS, but my focus as of now is primarily on the ES-environment. So, what I am trying to find out is whether or not there are initiatives,

support groups, courses, etc. that either discuss mental wellbeing or at least that open up this topic of conversation.

FR: There is a lot. I'm trying to pinpoint exactly what you're after, but if I understand you currently; we do have a lot of student organisations. There is the Disability Network, the Student Branch, we've got a buddy system. So, there are a lot of ways in which students could be there for one another. I can't really provide you with an extensive list, but there are definitely options.

DS: This is indeed the answer I was trying to receive, mainly to find out if there is a security net for students, whether it be peers or not. I also had a comment from a student that mentioned they felt like THUAS is concerned enough with mental health, so I wanted to create a clear picture also for myself on whether there are support groups. The buddy system is definitely a great one. I can't say I'm familiar with it, maybe it was something from my first year.

FR: Have you ever checked Student Portal?

DS: Yes, I know Student Portal but only as a portal. I haven't really used it throughout my time at THUAS for anything else but a way to get to Blackboard or Osiris. But I should check it out more, especially for my research.

FR: If you go to Student Portal and go to Services, and then click the first tile called Helping Hand, you'll find an overview of all available support channels within THUAS. You can also find trainings and workshop, and within those there are categories. There is also a group for, for example, *KOPP Jongeren* (young adults with parents who suffer from psychiatric issues). That's an official channel, and then there are a lot of student organisations and unions. It's definitely interesting for you to take a look at. But on the other hand, you receive much information during your introduction week, it is understandable students forget about this.

DS: Okay, amazing. That is indeed great, and it automatically answers my next question as well, which was if there were any trajectories for students that have experienced (recent) trauma. For example, situations at home or a recent death or maybe even more traumatic, but are there trajectories for these students without having to redirect them to off-campus organisations right away?

FR: It's interesting that you mention it, because during the Week of Wellbeing, we had different sessions that, for example, discussed how to deal with losing a loved one and the grief that comes with it, and one about stress at home. There were quite some registrations, but not a lot of students eventually showed up. Unfortunately, but the themes are definitely present. This is definitely something I want to work with more, loss and grief, especially during these times. I do think, however, that students feel like there is this obstacle for participating in these sessions that are offered on Student Portal. These are also offered by organisations like YOUZ and Indigo, and they offer a multitude of trainings for free, specifically for young adults. But usually, whenever students experience something in their lives, the first thing they do is going to their ECA'er, who can, in turn, refer you to one of these parties. But this can only be done if the student in question voices their issues in the first place, and then it's hoping that your ECA'er knows the internal structure well enough to redirect you into the right direction. This hasn't been optimized properly, but I hope this will be improved, we are aware of this.

DS: This is actually quite a good one. Definitely something I can take into account. Although, I have noticed that indeed finding this information is difficult for students, there appears to be an obstacle. They don't seem to be aware of this, or at least not of the way to obtain this information. Moreover, to come back at a point you made earlier about students not attending the sessions, I think a lot of students also don't feel comfortable enough to share their problems with their peers or teachers per se. They might want to, but the thought of other students being present might prevent them from actually going through with it, it's too personal. Maybe because there is still some kind of stigma on the topic.

FR: Sorry, I just remembered that I forgot to tell you something important.

DS: Oh, what is that?

FR: We recently had a research conducted by another organisation on wellbeing and guidance among first-year students. These consisted primarily out of conversations, qualitative research, and now we have developed a questionnaire that we're going to release. It made me think of it, because one of the questions on there, was how students would like to receive training in certain areas. Do they prefer it with peers or not, or rather one-on-one guidance? This is mainly to research the reasons students might have that prevents them from participating in these sessions, because there is very little

information on this topic. So, we hope to gain an insight on this through this questionnaire. Quite a lot of information, isn't it?

DS: It is, but also very usable information! I think I'm almost finished actually. I think the last question is, something we might have already discussed before, what kind of guidance is offered and how this form of guidance is decided on? But I think I've already had this answered, because you have of course your ECA'er and the dean, but maybe there are other key people I might not be aware of?

FR: It differs per study programme, and to be honest, from a centralized point of view we don't have a lot of insight on this, which could be an issue in and of itself. If you need more insight on this, you should inform within your own study programme, I think. What might be good to know is that there is a special employee/attention officer for every study programme that has been appointed their own specific task. These employees exist to offer extra counselling to students with extra needs, this could be by dyslexia or ADHD, but these also exist next to your ECA'er, mentor and coach.

DS: This is indeed one I wasn't aware of yet, so thank you! I think I've asked all my questions now, but maybe, if these are sharable of course, are there any results you can share with me from the survey about wellbeing? Maybe changes they'd like to see or how they're doing?

FR: What is definitely noteworthy from the results is that students really appreciate pro-activity from mentors and coaches. I think a point of attention for us is that we sometimes tend to think that students are adults, so if anything is wrong, they would let us know. And within programmes, the focus is logically speaking more on your progress and didactic supervision. But we see, especially during COVID-times, that whenever students receive a message from a mentor or coach asking how they're doing, we can see this impacts the wellbeing of students as well, they really appreciate this. But this is of course very difficult because teachers are also under a lot of pressure, so it's hard to strike the right balance.

DS: I think I'll really put my focus on that as well, because I've definitely noticed in this and in the previous interview that the expectational patterns are unevenly divided. Of course, teachers expect certain things from students, but vice versa as well. And I think students might sometimes forget that teachers are also going through really difficult times. It's a human thing, but I do think it might be something I can address in my dissertation as well. It's nice to see I got a lot of similarities in answers.

FR: You could always address and discuss it in the discussion chapter of your research.

DS: This is exactly what I was thinking of doing.

[Connection Lost – The conversation was continued; however, consisted of nothing more than a thank you and small talk.]

Appendix F – Results: Informed Consent Form Dave van Ginhoven



Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

1) Research Project Title: How can THUAS help to reduce stress levels among ES students?

2) Project Description (1 paragraph)

This dissertation is written with the purpose of researching the stress levels among ES students and how THUAS can help to reduce these if and when necessary. To acquire the needed data, an interview will be conducted with members of the university and/or faculty.

These questions are designed to provide an insight on information that is otherwise hard to obtain. Furthermore, these questions are an extension of the questionnaire, designed for the students of this programme, to fill in any gaps in knowledge that are still present.

The information used will be written from a purely informational standpoint, i.e. opinions or personal/off-the-record comments will not be used in the final version of the dissertation.

If you agree to take part in this study please read the following statement and sign this form.

I am 16 years of age or older.

I can confirm that I have read and understood the description and aims of this research. The researcher has answered all the questions that I had to my satisfaction.

I agree to the audio recording of my interview with the researcher.

I understand that the researcher offers me the following guarantees:

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. My name will not be used in the study unless I give permission for it.

Recordings will be accessible only by the researcher. Unless otherwise agreed, anonymity will be ensured at all times. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.

I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: Dave van Ginhoven

Signature:

Date: 6 April 2021

Appendix G – Results: Informed Consent Form Fee Romein



Informed Consent Form

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I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: H.A.Z.F. Romein

Signature: H.A.Z.F. Romein

Date: April 6, 2021



Romein, H.A.Z.F.
Tue 4/6/2021 1:01 PM
To: Swart, D.

Hi Dave,

Ik heb geen printer/scanner dus even zo: ik ga akkoord met het consent form.

Groet,
Fee

Translation:

Hi Dave,

I do not have a printer/scanner, so:

I hereby agree with the consent form.

Best,

Fee