

Normal Academic Standard: campaign for university education

What and why?

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) has asked BKB to support a broad coalition in organising an 'Alarm Day' on 6 April to press home the lobby of the VSNU, universities and trade unions. The entire academic community will stand united on this: staff, administrators, alumni, trade unions and students.

Newly elected Dutch Members of Parliament are the Alarm Day target audience, more specifically those designated to lead the coalition negotiations, the political parties' education spokespersons and their associates.

The objective is to ensure that the Dutch government invests an additional 1.1 billion euros in university education on a structural basis. This figure is supported by the recently published PwC report commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This investment is critical to safeguard the quality of university education. As a starting point, we have formulated the following message:

Core message

Dutch universities are among the best in the world. This benefits all of society. It ensures that our economy is competitive and innovative. Our universities educate the people we need to meet the challenges of our time, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the climate crisis.

Unfortunately, our universities are struggling due to being structurally underfunded. Although the number of students has been increasing for years, funding per student has dropped. This has left precious little time and financial resources to conduct high-quality research or deliver high-quality teaching, let alone both.

Yet these close ties between research and teaching are crucial for the quality of university education. The best way to educate students is have researchers give lectures to them. This way, students can learn first-hand about research methods and recent scientific insights and develop the inquisitive and critical attitude they need, both in the world of academia and beyond.

As a result of underfunding, students no longer receive the education they deserve, while our lecturers and professors are struggling to cope. It is high time to address this situation and to work towards a Normal Academic Standard to ensure the students of today receive the proper education they need to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

This is why teaching staff, researchers, students, administrators and alumni of all 14 Dutch research universities will be congregating on Tuesday, 6 April to sound the alarm. They will be calling on the new government to invest 1.1 billion euros on a structural basis. This call for investment is supported by the recently published PwC report commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. These investments are essential to restoring the level of Dutch university education to a Normal Academic Standard.

Visit www.normaalacademischpeil.nl for more information or to join in.

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Alliance partners have different perspectives

Because of the differences between the alliance partners, a consistent focus on the core message is key. We want to avoid conflicting messages. We will appoint three spokespersons to engage with the media: one administrator, one student and one representative of WOinActie. We will use the area surrounding the Hofvijver to demonstrate that the alliance is broader than these three spokespersons.

However, the alliance is made up of a variety of parties, each with their own experiences of structural underfunding. That is why we want to allow each of these parties – students, PhD candidates, researchers, staff, alumni, administrators, professors and lecturers – to explain from their own perspective why they are struggling to cope. We will ask all parties to base their messaging on the core message. This will ensure that their contributions support the call for and the importance of high-quality university education.

Alarm Day

We want to ensure that the core message reaches as wide an audience as possible. On Alarm Day, 6 April, the university education sector will sound the alarm. That day will see demonstrations take place not only in The Hague, but throughout the country. Lecturers, professors, PhD candidates, administrators and students will occupy actual public spaces to show that they are fed up.

Central demonstration: The Hague

We will let politicians know exactly how we feel by holding a demonstration around the Hofvijver. Professors, lecturers and students will sit, squat and stand inside the Hofvijver itself. They will all be donning special mortarboards (please note: if it is not possible to enter the Hofvijver proper, everyone will take up a position around the Hofvijver and toss their mortarboards into the water). We will invite outgoing Minister of Education, Culture and Science Ingrid van Engelshoven, the coalition negotiators for the new government, the political parties' lead candidates and their education spokespersons. This will enable a group of alliance spokespersons (the chair of the Dutch National Student Association, the chair of the Dutch National Union of Students, WOinActie lecturers, the president of the VSNU, a rector and a well-known professor) to hand over the call for investment while adhering to the coronavirus measures. All 150 MPs will receive a welcome pack with a special mortarboard, a commemorative glass, fact sheets with information on the issues and other background information. A photographer will also be present in The Hague to record the events.

Local demonstrations: university towns

We will appoint a demonstration leader in every university town who will be responsible for implementing one or more of the following action points:

- Projecting images of lecturers wearing red mortarboards and treading water onto iconic university and other buildings.
- Having university staff and students wearing the special mortarboard jump into a well-known body of water in their town to draw attention. Alternatively, they could consider jumping into a container filled with water out in front of the main university building.
- Each town has famous statues in public spaces. On Alarm Day, we could don them with the special mortarboard and take pictures for social media.
- If the budget allows, we could organise a living statue event, with actors wearing the mortarboard impersonating famous scientists.
- Sharing stories online of lecturers/professors/students and alumni wearing the special mortarboard.

BKB will also produce a tool kit with sample copy, images to be posted online and for the projections, and instructions for how to order the special mortarboard, so that universities can engage in this demonstration. The tool kit will be available for download from the dedicated website and also provided to the demonstration leaders.

Resources and channels

In the run-up to and during the Alarm Day, we will use the following resources and forms of communication.

- **Media approach and publicity** | To ensure the widest possible coverage, BKB will approach the national media together with the VSNU and WOinActie.

- We will start by approaching well-known columnists in national newspapers with an academic background (e.g. Robbert Dijkgraaf) ahead of time, asking them to issue a call to action in their columns. WOinActie will send letters to the editors of regional media in each region to achieve the same.
- Both in the run-up to and during the Alarm Day, we will put the spotlight on the three spokespersons. All three will explain from their own perspective why they are struggling to cope and why a Normal Academic Standard is necessary.
- The parliamentary and specialist education press will be invited to attend the Alarm Day and the presentation of the call for investment to the minister. We will also try to involve the daily talk shows. In the university towns, we will coordinate the media approach with the designated demonstration leaders.
- **The special mortarboard** | WOinActie has adopted a red square as a symbol of their fight for more structural funding. Ahead of the Alarm Day, we will order ample stocks of red mortarboards and red felt online, so that not only professors can wear the mortarboard and there will be plenty left over to put on the various statues.
- **Face masks** | As we do not want to get into trouble about respecting the coronavirus measures, we are investigating the possibility of producing special face masks. The face masks will feature a waterline design, so that it seems like the water is coming up to our lips.
- **Straightforward campaign website** | The website www.normaalacademischpeil.nl will feature the core message and links to relevant information to substantiate that people are struggling to cope. It will also explain what is needed to improve the climate for universities, so that university staff do not abandon the sector and students receive a better education. We will illustrate this with testimonials from students, staff, PhD candidates, administrators, professors and alumni, accompanied by pictures of them wearing the special mortarboard, creating shareable **social content** from a variety of perspectives:
 - We will ask PhD candidates, professors, administrators and staff to contribute short testimonials on why they are struggling to cope, how this impacts their work and the quality of education, and the importance of a Normal Academic Standard.
 - Students will share their perspectives on the importance of high-quality education.
 - We will also feature contributions from prominent alumni about what they believe has been the added value of their university education. In addition, people will be able to sign up for the Alarm Day on the website.
- **Online campaign** | Through the channels of the VSNU, WOinActie and the universities, we will share contributions from famous alumni about the added value of their university education. We will also share testimonials from lecturers, administrators and students about the consequences of underfunding. As many of them as possible will be pictured wearing the special mortarboard topped by a red square.
- **Tool kits and newsletters for all partners** | We will call on the academic community to sign up for the Alarm Day, so that we can send them all the materials they need in a tool kit a few days ahead of time. The tool kit will contain images, resources and copy that partners can use to call attention to the Alarm Day on their website and social media. The tool kit will also contain the images to be projected onto buildings throughout the country.
- **Fact sheets for stakeholders will include at least the following elements:**
 - What is the problem? What does it prevent us from doing right now?
 - The consequences of underfunding: workload, quality of education, few opportunities for young academics, stature of the Netherlands.
 - How far behind are we lagging behind other countries?
 - The solution. How much more money is needed? Why this specific amount? What will the extra money pay for?
- **Welcome packs** | The minister and all new MPs will receive a welcome pack with the fact sheet, the special glass, information on the position of Dutch universities, the PwC report, and the position paper on the importance of the close relation between teaching and research. It will be accompanied by a letter on behalf of all the rectors explaining the reason for the welcome pack: the threat to the quality of the education of those we need to meet the challenges of today. This is a matter for all MPs, not just the parties' education spokespersons. We will also include an invitation to an in-person meeting with university representatives.
- **Starting the lobby** | Lobbyists will approach MPs to inform them of the response of the Dutch universities to the PwC report.

After the Alarm Day

After the Alarm Day, the alliance partners will join forces with the VSNU and university lobbyists to continue efforts to drive the message home. They will do so by:

- **arranging meetings between the parties' education spokespersons** and individual lecturers and/or administrators to make clear that this problem affects the entire academic community;
- **continuing to share the testimonials of serving academics and prominent alumni** on their own channels, ideally keeping this going until we receive the 1.1 billion euros.