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Regards: COVID-19 approach for higher education

On Thursday the 12th of March 2020, the Cabinet announced measures to minimise the spread of the coronavirus as much as possible. Public health was a priority in this. For higher education, these measures mean that until the 6th of April, no more educational activities will take place at colleges and universities and that education should, as far as possible, be provided through distance learning. On the 15th of March 2020, the Cabinet announced additional measures that involve the discontinuation of educational activities in schools in other educational sectors.

This obviously has major consequences for higher education. Continuing teaching and examination as much as possible in a different way requires a lot from educational institutions. In practice, there are already many very good examples of institutions implementing this. This requires a great deal of commitment from the institutions and their staff. Important here is that the staff needed for the continuation of education and higher education falls within the definition of vital and crucial sectors. The exceptional situation also requires flexibility from students. I have a lot of admiration and appreciation for all those who are committed to provide as much continuity as possible under the current circumstances. I notice that everyone involved is doing their utmost and I want to support them as much as possible in this.

In this letter I will elaborate on the implications this has on higher level education and on guidelines for higher education institutions to continue education as much as possible. In the appendix you will find a service document containing these recommendations. This service document is supported by the VH, VSNU, NFU, NRTO, MBO Council and the student organisations (ISO, LSVb and JOB). This document will be adapted and adjusted where necessary in the coming weeks.

Institutions are making an effort to continue education and assessment as much as possible. If it is not possible to do so following the usual rules and regulations, institutions can and should rely on hardship clauses in their institutional policy or in the law. Even in the absence of a formal hardship clause, this special situation may require the institution to implement a hardship clause in practice. In cases of doubt about this consideration in specific cases, institutions are asked to contact their respective umbrella organisation that takes stock of questions and concerns and keeps in touch with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (OCW)) regarding these questions and concerns.

The higher education institutions, teachers and students are faced with the challenge to continue their work as far as possible. The government has a facilitating role here. I have therefore made agreements with several organisations, such as NVAO, NWO and the CBHO, that aim to provide clarity to all those involved in higher education, and where possible to relieve pressure and to accommodate. The most important points are included in the service document. For example, NWO is postponing interviews and extending the deadlines for submission of applications. It has been agreed with the NVAO that the submission of review

reports will be granted a one-year extension. My ministry will continue to consult with these organisations to be able to act together according to the situation in case there are any new developments.

In this letter I will discuss a number of themes. These are elaborated on in more detail in the enclosed service document for the institutions.

Teaching activities, examinations and internships

No more physical teaching activities, including examination, can take place at the locations of the higher education institutions. It is best for institutions to decide for themselves what concrete adaptation to this is most appropriate. Many activities take place digitally. The location(s) of educational institutions can remain open to facilitate students who cannot make use of distance learning at home and thus want to make use of the institution's learning and ICT facilities. When it comes to the use of campus facilities, such as libraries and research rooms, institutions can make their own choices, as long as they comply with the general instructions of RIVM and GGD. Internships and other education-related activities outside the institution may continue, unless the employer has reason related to the coronavirus (or related measures) to discontinue the activity. The safety of the student comes first.

Application and selection

The application and selection procedures were in full swing when this crisis broke out. As far as possible, the procedures and methods of working will be continued, although it may not always be possible for these to be carried out in the usual manner. In addition, pupils and students in VO and MBO may be more focused on the present than on the study they want to

commence in September. To give (prospective) students more time and space to register, the registration date will be shifted to the 1st of June. This means that the time between application and registration will be shorter, and therefore the time to organise study-choice checking activities will also be shorter. Institutions are taking on the task of organising these activities as best as they can considering the current possibilities. The deadline for the completion of the selection procedures is postponed from the 15th of April to the 15th of June at the latest.

By moving this deadline, institutions have more time to design any possible alternative selection procedures, and to design the process and the communication regarding the placement of students. Because students can be simultaneously registered for a study course with and without selection procedure, they are assured of a study place.

Binding study advice

As far as possible, institutions will continue teaching and examination (in alternative forms). However, this will be difficult for some of the courses and students. It is therefore possible that some students are delayed in their studies by the corona crisis in such a way that they do not meet the standards for their binding study advice. In order to do justice to possible delays that students may experience, and to provide upfront clarity towards students, institutions are requested to postpone the issue of a negative binding study advice to the second academic year, using the existing legal possibility.

Students abroad and international students

Dutch students who are abroad for study or internships will also be affected by the corona crisis and will have to or want to interrupt their study or internship and return the Netherlands. Institutions must keep in contact with these students and inform them wherever possible. For students from abroad who want to or must return to their country of origin but are faced with obstacles regarding their departure, the institution in the Netherlands will make an effort to keep students well informed. In addition, these students from abroad may be affected in a specific way: for students who experience a delay in their studies, this may result in their residence permit expiring because the right of residence is linked to their study progress.

At my ministry, I have set up a contact person for students and staff who functions as a liaison between umbrella organisations and the BZ, for the Dutch students who are abroad and foreign students. The Ministry of BZ plays a role in the actualisation, wherever necessary and possible, of return to the Netherlands of people who are detained abroad, including students. For a solution regarding foreign students, consultation and coordination between OCW and the Ministry of Justice and Security (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid) and the IND is required, including a possible role of BZ.

Financial effects for students and institutions

(Former) students may find themselves in financial difficulties because their income disappears while expenses continue. DUO is working hard to help students and alumni and will practice maximum leniency. Students can make use of the loan possibilities. If they do not have a maximum loan yet, they can increase their loan. This can be done with retroactive effect from the beginning of the academic year. In addition, students can apply for tuition fee

credit. This can be done by students themselves through mijnDUO. If this is still insufficient, students can contact DUO for possibilities. I call on landlords to show leniency towards tenants who run into financial difficulties as a result of corona (and related measures).

Former students with a study debt may also experience problems with their repayments. They may suspend their repayments by using their grace period. This can be done for a maximum of 5 years during the repayment period. If this period has already been used up or if the former student has already made a payment arrangement, DUO will be lenient.

It is clear that continuing education with due regard for the adopted corona measures demands a lot from all parties involved. This will also have a financial impact on institutions. OCW will have a discussion with the education umbrella organisations as soon as there is more clarity regarding the exact extent of the consequences. If acute financial problems occur, the OCW will consider how these can be solved in consultation with the relevant funded institution and the inspection.

With regard to the quality agreements, it has been decided to remove the uncertainty by allocating the amounts in 2021, even if the institution does not yet have an approved quality plan. The institutions will finalise the plans at a later date.

Recently, a lot of efforts have been made to be able to conduct this year's National Student Survey (NSE). The amendment to the law for this purpose has come into force and all necessary preparations have been made by Studiekeuze123. Unfortunately, now there is a case of force majeure and together with the umbrella organisations and Student Unions we

decided not to conduct the NSE of the coming year. Organising a student satisfaction survey at the time of a corona crisis would be unlikely to provide valid results. In addition, institutions currently want to devote all their energy to organising education as best as possible. It is therefore not wise to also burden them with the efforts required to properly organise the NSE.

I highly appreciate that the higher education institutions and students are working with so much commitment and diligence on solutions and the continuation of higher education in these exceptional circumstances. That gives me the confidence that we can get through the situation together.

the Minister of Education, Culture and Science,

Ingrid van Engelshoven