



Report Education in code red

Shortened version for the student representatives

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1. Introduction

The Coronavirus measures, in particular the transition to code red in higher education, have a serious impact on the students. There are multiple signals indicating that the switch hasn't always been easy for the students and that a lot can still be improved. The suggestions, however, vary greatly which makes it hard to uncover the specific sore points. In order to get a clear sight of the biggest stumbling blocks and be able to propose tangible suggestions, the Ghent Student Council (GSR) has conducted two surveys. Based on these surveys, the GSR has drawn up a report and presented it to the General Assembly on the 8th of December 2020. This document contained the findings and recommendations to make the current situation more bearable.

Furthermore, the GSR formulated this shortened document. This version is meant to be a guide for student representatives while higher education continues in code red. It summarizes the most important findings and gives concrete suggestions which can be considered in meetings at faculty or study programme level.

2. Practicals

One of the main concerns are the practicals. Since these are crucial in rehearsing skills and processing the courses, students are asking to let these continue as much as possible. Without practicals it would often be impossible to acquire certain essential competences. Furthermore, having completed particular exercises, skills or tests is often a requirement to master the study material when faced with an exam.

This means that **in the case practicals can't continue**, it is nonetheless of the utmost importance that there is a reflection on how to make up for this loss. Timing will be key, given the fact that it will be practically impossible to schedule them all during the *inhaalweek*. The competences that students need to acquire and the workload that comes with this process will have to be taken into account when revising the schedule. Replacing everything with assignments isn't necessarily a fully-fledged and qualitative option.

Finally, clear communication by the faculties or study programmes is paramount. What is being defined in the Ghent University's policy is often unclear to students. They raise questions on whether or not language courses, the architectural workshops, the movement and sporting activities of the Bachelor of Science in Physical Education and Movement Sciences, the exercises in Mathematics... are categorized as practicals or not. Study programmes should inform students as soon as possible on what will and will not continue. Students are also asking to explicitly communicate how exactly they will acquire the competences normally obtained during practicals.

Suggestions

- Preferably, practicals will continue as much as possible. If this wouldn't be the case, students want to know how the 'loss' of final competences will be met: e.g. substitute assignments, postponed practicals...
- Transparency is important to guarantee the quality of the substitute assignments. This can be done by using a checklist, a matrix or in consultation with the students. These overview documents clearly state the expectations and how the original final competences/learning outcomes will be reached via a new, alternative assignment.
- Another option is to ask students and colleagues for feedback on the content of the substitute assignment. A dialogical approach is very important. This can happen during meetings of the study programme committees, conversations with teachers, during classes or feedback via mail, and so on.
- If there are any practicals that need to be caught up with during the second semester, it is important to make sure that the new dates will not coincide with the already determined deadlines for courses during the second semester.

3. Qualitative teaching material

Online education demands a different approach by students. Teachers often play into this by offering different or several forms of teaching material. In general, students are quite content with the provided teaching material. In particular, PowerPoint presentations and solutions to exercises are referred to as better/more useful tools to process the study material. Further readings¹, however, are viewed as an additional workload and give the sense of self-study, rather than support of the online classes.

Secondly, students say that they notice a positive difference in their results when additional, non-mandatory, teaching material is provided due to the changed teaching formats (i.e. knowledge clips, overviews of the study material, additional exercises, mock exams...). Furthermore, students are asking to provide clarity on what is expected from them. They indicate that, during the online classes, small nuances can get lost because it is more difficult to ask questions. This is why they ask for additional, explanatory material (i.e. overviews of the study material, a syllabus that is typed out, uploading the lecture presentations to Ufora, a mock exam, additional exercises...). This request comes back everywhere, but in particular with first-year students.

Finally, the quality of the livestreams has to be a focal point. More specifically, there have been calls to record the blackboard as well. Annotations and schemes made on the board are often not visible on the livestreams or recordings.

Suggestions

- Students advocate for additional, supportive study material (besides the classes): knowledge clips, overviews of the study material, additional exercises, mock exams, and so on. It has to be clear, however, what is mandatory and what optional.
- At the beginning of the stream it is advised to check with the students whether or not everything is working technically: does the audio function, is the black board visible?
- Students would like an overview of the study material that states what they have to learn, but also indicates the priorities of the subject matter. This shouldn't be a ready-made, detailed overview of what is asked on evaluations and what not, but

¹ Further readings refer to texts used by the teacher as an alternative to on campus education. Supporting texts, e.g. as background, of course still have their (academic) value. Such readers of texts can still be a part of the curriculum, just like they would under 'normal' circumstances.

should help the student to grasp the expectations of the teacher and the difference between essential study material and mere background information.

4. Organisation of teaching activities

With regard to the timing, students prefer that all the teaching material is made available online at the start of the semester, ideally in the most structured way possible (e.g. ordered per week, chapter or theme), so students won't lose their overview. In this manner, scheduling is more simple and students can organize their semester the way they want to. Furthermore, it is easier to estimate the workload and set up a realistic schedule. Preferably, lessons are put online at fixed moments. This helps students maintain the routine of a 'normal semester'. It is more practical to link the recordings on Ufora. This way students don't have to search through different platforms for each course.

Furthermore, students are in favour of non-mandatory tests and assignments throughout the year as a means of intermediate feedback. Their reaction is very positive when these assignments are not graded and just serve as an exercise. It is very important that these always include an element of feedback, however. Teachers too can learn from this where they have to make adjustments.

Students also request shorter classes, both on campus and online. In general, online classes take up more time because teachers ask for more work in preparation for and after the classes. Teachers often exceed the determined time limit which disrupts the students' schedules. This is why students ask for more breaks and less intensive, long lessons. However, this should not be at the expense of the overall amount of teaching time: it is important that the number of contact hours remains.

Suggestions

- Students indicate that they prefer the teaching material to be put online as soon as possible, preferably on Ufora in an order that coincides with the structure of the classes or chapters.
- Online classes best take place on the same moment when they were originally scheduled. Students ask for the recordings to be available automatically and shortly after the class is finished. The threshold for mailing the teacher to ask for the recording is high.
- Non-mandatory tests and assignments throughout the year are welcomed by the students. A possible way to do this is via the 'self-test tool' on Ufora. This function automatically and immediately provides feedback. These tests and assignments can later on be reused or slightly adjusted, so it doesn't raise the teachers' workload.
- In order to remain concentrated, especially when following digital education, students would like shorter lessons with more breaks. In this case, however, we don't plead for a reduction of the amount of contact hours.

5. Ufora

Students ask for a better use of the various Ufora-tools. These can have a big, positive impact while studying and processing the course material. The following tools came out as the best (in descending order):

- Discussions
- Tests/Self-tests
- Collaboration space
- Assignments
- Chat
- Checklists
- Surveys
- Groups

With regard to the 'Discussions tool', a number of suggestions have been raised. Students ask to create a category per class or theme which will contain questions. It needs to be communicated whether the teacher will answer the questions themselves or it is up to the students to help each other. If the latter is the case, it is best to organise another session with the teacher. Some teachers opt to only open a discussion at a specific time. This is understandable, as it gives the teacher the opportunity to regulate the stream of questions, but the answers aren't visible anymore afterwards. Making it possible to post anonymously is also advised. This lowers the threshold to ask questions, resulting in more students doing it.

Furthermore, students ask for more uniformity in the way teachers use Ufora. Given the fact that each teacher uses the tools (tests, discussions, assignments) differently, it is often very chaotic. A more structured approach to the content is also requested. Ordering the documents per theme or lesson is a possibility.

Students tend to lose their overview of all the notifications due to the amount of documents and so forth that are uploaded. Therefore, they suggest that teachers send a notification when something important (like an assignment, mock exam or test) is put online. Of course not every additional text needs a separate notification. Important information can also be bundled.

Suggestions

- Discussions:
 - Clear communication on who will answer: teacher or students
 - Make posting anonymously possible
 - Structuring the content
 - Not closing it until after the resit examination period

- If the teachers notice that something regarding the course is unclear, the discussion tool cannot be the only way to deal with this. In this case we ask for an additional moment of contact at the end of the class.
- Under the header 'Content' on Ufora, it is advised to categorize everything per week/chapter/theme and to add shortcuts to the relevant discussions, where additional questions can be raised and comments made.
- Students ask to only use notifications for the most important updates, e.g. when communicating a deadline for a certain test or assignment. If more information has to be shared, we ask to bundle this as much as possible.
- Documents cannot just be uploaded attached to a notification, but have to be placed under 'Content' as well. If a notification refers to a specific document, it is best to link to it and not upload it as an attachment to the email.
- Furthermore, we advise teachers to use the 'checkmarks' with documents or assignments when placing these online. This way students can check whether they finished it or still have to view it.

6. Internships

Last year internships got cancelled during code red. Most students don't prefer to cancel the internships completely. In this way they miss out on important skills and competences. Postponing the internship still gives students the opportunity to gain practical experience. The internships should still take place during the academic year, as prolonging the study programme is not desirable.

Most of the students don't prefer the option to replace the internships with an assignment. This would add to the workload in these already changing and uncertain times. Furthermore, while making an assignment you don't practice the same skills that you would in the professional field. Students didn't find the assignments to be relevant or adequate. The best option thus seems to let the internships continue (in an adjusted form) or postpone them to a later moment in the same academic year.

Suggestions

- With regard to internships, it is asked to let them continue where possible, via telework if needed. Postponement of internships should be limited to the same academic year, in order to avoid prolonging the duration of the study programme. We ask to consider substitute assignments only as a last resort and that the issue is tackled in consultation with the students and colleagues in order to guarantee the quality and attainability of the substitute assignment.

7. Evaluations

Students prefer on campus examinations, just like under normal circumstances. This avoids stress due to failing technology, they are used to the format and it's an opportunity to see their fellow students, respecting social distancing. Other students found, however, that the contamination risk would be too high in the case of on campus examinations.

Students feel less positive about online examinations for several reasons. The fear for technical malfunction reigns. Students wrote that they did experience anxiety not just for the exam itself, but also for possible glitches. Stress for possible false accusations of fraud also play a role in this. Furthermore, online examinations often contain different kinds of questions than those on campus. This uncertainty causes extra pressure, students say. Additionally, they are not used to taking online exams and thus don't know what to expect. It is sometimes unclear if they will be able to return to previous questions, what will happen if they run out of time, and so on.

With regard to the option to replace exams with forms of permanent evaluation, there is no consensus. On the one hand substitute assignments relieve some of the stress during the examination period. Furthermore, it is less of a snapshot, which means that, as a student, you can display your skills better. On the other hand these assignments add to the workload during the year. Online classes already demand more effort, time and scheduling. Additional, graded assignments only add more pressure.

Suggestions

- By letting the students take a mock exam, they can adjust their expectations and prepare adequately depending on the format of the evaluation. This also gives the opportunity to test the online platform in advance in order to avoid as much technical delay as possible when the real exam takes place.
- In the case of online examinations, students ask to be flexible with the duration of the exam if the student has lost time due to technical reasons.
- In the case of permanent evaluation, students ask for adequate support with the assignments. Uncertainty can be dealt with by stating very clearly what is expected. Trial versions also help.

8. Code red: positive differences

Of course code red has caused things to change. The clearest difference is that students have more time. They don't lose time commuting, (sporting) activities have been cancelled and you can't really meet your friends or family. Cancelled mandatory practicals have a positive impact on their schedule as well. However, all of this goes along with a detrimental impact on their mental health and during a semi-lockdown they don't have this advantage anymore.

The fact that students have more time means that they can plan their days more easily the way they want to. In the survey students stated that this has had a great impact. They can study during their most productive hours and choose freely how much time they spend on what course, thanks to the online learning paths and recordings. The fact that the latter can be viewed whenever you want, is perceived as a positive difference. The same goes for the ability to pause, slow down or speed up the recordings.

Suggestions

- Being able to schedule everything yourself is an advantage to most students. Offering recordings is thus highly suggested. We recommend that you upload the learning material well in advance.
- Preferably, teachers place the recordings online at the exact time the class is scheduled, or immediately afterwards. In this way students can follow their regular schedule. Other students can plan more easily, which turns out to be one of the biggest advantages of education in code red.

9. Code red: negative differences

Code red has negative consequences as well. The students' main concern is the detrimental impact on their mental health. This is due to several reasons. The workload is too high and causes a lot of stress. The lack of on campus classes has made self-study more prevalent and raised the pressure on students. There is less diversion which makes the whole academic year feel like one long examination period. Taking some time off then feels like violating a rule stating that you should be studying all the time. Furthermore, there are a lot of additional assignments because of the changed lessons and examination formats. This in turn results in more work.

Related to this is the prevailing sense of loneliness and isolation. Not being able to study together, not seeing other students in class and not having the opportunity to meet afterwards, etc. All of this has had a big impact, reinforced by the feeling of despair that grew because students don't know when they would be able to see each other again. Teaching in smaller groups improves the social contact to a certain degree, but is not sufficient since it isn't real diversion. Students need some leisure with their fellow students or friends outside the university.

Students also made comments on the way of communication. They write that there have been efforts, but that the information on missed internships, delayed exam schedules, etc. wasn't always clear.

Suggestions

- Lessons in break-out rooms or practice classes in smaller groups contribute to the students' social contact and wellbeing. It is recommended to leave some space afterwards for the students to chat with each other so that they feel less lonely.

10. Study locations

Students often feel lonely while studying, which makes the study locations very sought after. There are multiple reasons for this. An unsafe situation at home can cause studying to be less of a priority. Other students wrote that they live together with someone in need of care, which takes up more time than usual. Loneliness and isolation are common issues too. Not being able to study with others, not seeing anyone in class, no occasions to get together, and so on. All of this has a big impact.

Suggestions

- Offering study locations will tackle the sense of loneliness and isolation and also make sure that students with a bad situation at home can study calmly.

11. Mental health

A first factor that has a major influence on the students' mental health is the increased workload. Students find that in comparison to the on campus classes, the online lessons increase the workload, since these often ask for more preparation and thus more work before and after the classes. Furthermore, the interaction during on campus classes is often replaced by additional tasks. The students deem the online classes to be more time-consuming and labour-intensive. The new working formats seem to be the biggest stumbling blocks. Other factors that influence the workload are the availability of the material and difficulties faced when scheduling.

Suggestions

- When the recording is stopped at the end of the class, the Zoom or MS Teams call can remain open for some time. In this way students can still interact with each other like they would on campus in the hallway. we have noticed that this works best immediately after the class ends.
- At the beginning and at the end of the class the teacher can shortly ask if everyone is feeling alright, whether they have difficulties understanding the content of the lessons, if they have problems with the assignments, and so on.
- The teacher can be transparent as well if they find it hard to give their lessons. Students understand that the current situation is hard for teachers and assistants too, but sometimes don't have a clear view of what's going on at 'the other side'.