

Dear Members of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences,

As we begin the new calendar year, we hope you had a chance to relax over the break and are feeling refreshed. As the 33rd Board of Pro Geo, we are excited to introduce this newsletter – a new initiative of our Board – to update you on our work since the start of our term in September! Going forward, we plan to share updates approximately every two months to keep you informed about our activities and progress.

Policy Plan 2024/25

We recently finalised our [Policy Plan 2024/25](#) with support from our Advisory Council and Board 32, focusing on three key pillars:

- **Improving education quality:** Regarding initiatives such as enhancing field-relevant digital skills, facilitating the creation of personal portfolios, and increasing the availability of practice materials.
- **Monitoring student well-being:** This includes creating the Student Support Structure document and monitoring the impact of the Smarter Academic Year pilot programme (explained in detail later in this newsletter).
- **Increasing student awareness:** Strengthening communication about Pro Geo's efforts through initiatives like this newly launched newsletter, regular social media posts, and weekly Coffee Hours held on Mondays during lecture weeks.

National Developments: Budget Cuts and *Wet Internationalisering in Balans* (WIB; Internationalisation in Balance Bill)

Pro Geo is closely monitoring critical national policy changes affecting higher education, informed by insights from FSS staff information sessions and the latest *Radenoverleg* (Meeting of the Councils) – a quarterly University-level meeting.

a) Budget Cuts

The Dutch government has announced a €2 billion reduction in education funding, with €1 billion specifically targeting higher education. These cuts in the medium term (2025–2028) are bound to result in fewer staff hours, reduced course offerings, and

lower student enrolment figures, but they may also provide an opportunity to reevaluate current approaches to administering existing courses.

b) *Wet Internationalisering in Balans* (WIB; Internationalisation in Balance Bill)

The proposed bill aims to fundamentally reshape higher education in the Netherlands, bringing structural and operational challenges to universities. Its primary goals are to reduce the number of international students, establish Dutch as the principal academic language, and promote the integration of international students into Dutch society. To comply with the legislation, bachelor's programmes taught in English must undergo *Toets Anderstalig Onderwijs* (TAO; Assessment of Foreign Language Education) to continue operating. This assessment evaluates programmes based on criteria like labour market alignment, interdisciplinarity, and regional needs.

However, at the central University level, there are concerns about the significant challenges in meeting these requirements, including a heavy administrative workload to prepare TAO dossiers, potential transitions of programmes from English to Dutch, and substantial costs that the government does not plan to compensate for. Adding to the complexity is the ministerial discretion involved in approving programmes, which creates further uncertainty. Although the implementation of the WIB is tentatively scheduled to start in the first quarter of 2025, the timeline remains uncertain due to persistent delays and unresolved issues, leaving institutions unsure of when they will need to fully adapt to its requirements.

Smarter Academic Year Pilot Programme

The Smarter Academic Year pilot programme is a national initiative involving five UG faculties, including FSS. The programme aims to reduce stress for both students and staff by decreasing the number of teaching and exam weeks and shortening the academic year – notably longer in the Netherlands than in other European countries.

Pro Geo will actively monitor the pilot's impact within FSS by gathering comprehensive feedback. To achieve this, we plan to organise two focus group sessions – one after block 1b and another during block 2b (in relation to the Career Week). These sessions will provide detailed insights into how the changes affect workload, well-being, and the overall experiences of students. Moreover, pilot-related questions have already been added to course

reflections of all FSS programmes, allowing for continuous evaluation and data collection throughout the academic year.

We encourage students to sign up for the first round of focus groups on the **3rd of February**. The 13.00–14.00 slot is full, so we invite you to register for one of the remaining two time slots: **14.00–15.00** and **15.00–16.00**. Sign up [here!](#)

Programme Committees

On the 13th of November, we welcomed our newly recruited Programme Committee (PC) members with an introductory event to prepare them for their vital role in improving education within our Faculty. PCs evaluate courses, lecturers, block structures, and Teaching and Examination Regulations while representing student perspectives. With dedicated members now in place for every programme, all PCs have successfully participated in their first meetings, reflecting on block 1a.

Student Support Structure

To simplify navigating university resources, we've created a comprehensive [Student Support Structure](#) document. It outlines key contacts for academic, administrative, and personal support. The document will soon be available on our website and shared directly with all FSS students.

Pre-Master Representation

Pre-master students often face unique challenges within the Faculty, and we understand that it can sometimes feel like there's no direct way to share your feedback or thoughts about your programme. While bachelor's and master's courses are represented through PCs, we recognise that pre-master students don't have a similar platform – and we are committed to changing that. That's why our vice-chair, Lo Muller, is here as your dedicated representative, ensuring your concerns are heard and taken seriously.

We want you to know that we are approachable and here to support you throughout your pre-master journey. To give you a voice, we're planning informal meetings and surveys after each block, where you can share your experiences and ideas in a relaxed, open environment. On top of that, we're considering creating an online resource hub where you can both access and contribute helpful materials.

We hope this newsletter provides a clear overview of our work and progress, and we look forward to continuing our efforts together to enhance the academic experience for everyone at our Faculty. If you have any questions, suggestions, or ideas, feel free to contact us at **board@progeo.nl**.

Warm regards,

The 33rd Board of Pro Geo