

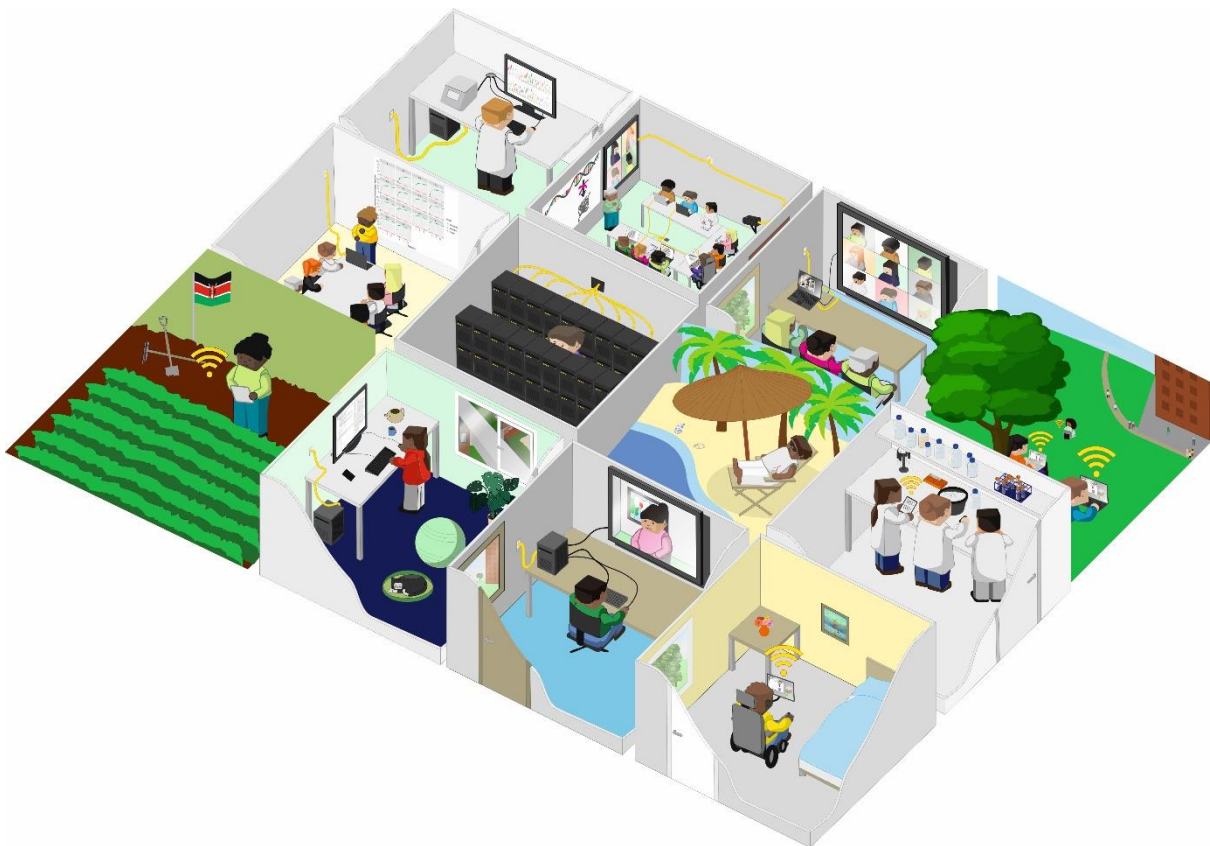
**Lessons from COVID-19 disruption to increase the quality of
research, teaching, and work-life-balance @WUR**

By the Wageningen Young Academy, inspired by an interactive
workshop series

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WAGENINGEN
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Rationale

For an academic, teaching, research, and management are gratifying and versatile elements of the job. For many, being an academic is a very conscious choice and most are very dedicated to their work; however, this makes achieving a healthy work-life balance an enduring challenge. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many academics were struggling to maintain a status quo in which work and private life were balanced in a productive and happy way. The COVID-19 crisis has upended this status quo. While this crisis has disrupted both personal and professional lives, it also provided new opportunities to catalyze much needed change and insights for redesigning a healthier and more sustainable academia.

Wageningen Young Academy organized three online workshops in October of 2020 with the purpose of uncovering new ways to conduct an academic job that may contribute to a healthier and more sustainable academia by reflecting on the changes sparked by the COVID-19 crisis. In the workshops, a diverse team of academic members, consisting of support staff, PhDs, Postdocs, tenure trackers, and full professors at WUR, were asked to co-create a vision for WUR for the year 2030. Participants drew from the learnings brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of research, teaching and work-life balance: *what do we want to keep/improve and what do we want to get rid of in our work practices as we envision a transition to a “post-COVID” WUR?* The workshops were designed and facilitated by an experienced international¹ facilitator based on design thinking and back-casting concepts.

The workshop series uncovered a set of recurring issues, challenges, and promising opportunities that academics face in their work. This report summarizes the suggestions that emerged for each of the three components of academic life: research, teaching and work-life balance. The report outlines how suggestions may be implemented and reviews their possible benefits. We hope that these suggestions will be considered at WUR as part of new visions for the post-COVID age. We believe that our recommendations will improve the quality of research, teaching, and the lives of staff and students in the coming years.

For the year 2030, we envision a WUR where...

The carbon-footprint of **research** is reduced, as well as its time and monetary cost. State-of-the-art technologies support collaboration of international teams—including meetings and data collection and sharing—thereby reducing the need to travel.

Teaching thrives on a variety of formats and methods: it is offered in hybrid format, with a combination of physical meetings for students on campus and virtual encounters to increase accessibility to students around the globe. Teaching is also tailored to students’ interests and aptitudes, providing the option of following either standard or in-depth courses depending on a student’s career plans and ambitions. These flexible and versatile forms of teaching are made possible by state-of-the-art technologies that allow flawless integration of people on site and online.

Work-life balance is improved by giving everyone the option to personalize their workspace packages and choose whether they want to work at home, in the office, or a combination of the two. On campus, diverse and functional workspaces allow staff to facilitate teamwork with members around the globe. Appropriate technology and accommodations are available to facilitate staff’s work preferences and interactions.

¹ www.Ignite2Transform.com

1. Research

In 2030 a WUR ecologist arrives in the morning on campus to attend a key lecture by her project collaborator in Japan. By switching on the high-quality video conference equipment that is available in every meeting room in the building, she can seamlessly participate. This time-efficient choice also reduces her carbon footprint. After the lecture, the ecologist meets up online with Brazilian colleagues who are collecting samples for a collaborative field project.

1a Remote data accessibility and collection is guaranteed.

By 2030 data archiving and openness of research data have been fully implemented. It is recognized that good science is not only about novelty but also reproducibility. Openness and sharing of data have led to new ways of doing science. Data collection and international collaborations are organized in flexible ways. Staff can work on campus, at home, or in the field, considering their personal needs, sustainability concerns, and research requirements.

Advantages

- Remote working options and platforms support open science and global accessibility.
- More researchers will be able to work from locations that fit their personal preferences and situations.
- Doing science is more convenient and efficient, with well-integrated data accessibility.
- Mobility limitations are less impactful on the career trajectories of (young) academics.

Implementation

- Full IT and data support and infrastructure.
- Safe data storage
- Fast and convenient access to data from workstations on campus, at home, and abroad.
- State of the art video conferencing facilities.
- Projects involving field-work or other research activities abroad are from the start designed and organized with local actors involved that can execute the work.
- Permanent fund to tackle unforeseeable research delays to prevent derailment of early career researcher

1b Effective and sustainable interactions around the globe

By 2030, the need to meet people in real life is weighed against the option of meeting them virtually. Engaging with global organizations and participating in international meetings continues to be central to the advancement of science. Scientists and other actors work together in the most optimal form in hybrid international meetings.

Advantages

- Costs and time hurdles for joining international activities and meetings will be lower, increasing the opportunities for other researchers across the globe to also participate.
- Environmental impact of travelling is reduced, setting an example for the outside world.
- Researchers may feel less forced to travel for career and work reasons, which can reduce the toll that travelling can also take on private life.

Implementation

- Support infrastructure for organizing high quality online-real life hybrid meetings.
- Support in the design of hybrid meetings and in the most effective use of mixing online with in-person meetings.
- Professional development for effective online collaboration.
- Support from a travel agency that prioritizes sustainable options.



2. Teaching

In 2030 the campus at Wageningen University is buzzing with students. It's a bright spring day and students are in the grass watching lectures on their laptops. Other students discuss their assignment with their group mates who are in Brazil, Zambia or elsewhere in a high-quality video conference room. In the lecture halls, a small group of students continue their discussion with a lecturer, while the students that followed the lecture online are chatting virtually with another lecturer. After the lecture, the on-site students will meet with the online students using video conferencing and work together on their practical. In the practical rooms, a group of students is learning to analyze chemical reagents. The students that follow the course strictly online read about the theory of reagent analyses and do a virtual reality practical to learn the technique.

Due to the perfect implementation of on-site and online teaching, studying at Wageningen University is accessible for truly everyone around the world.

2a. Teaching is offered in a blended form, thereby increasing accessibility

Lectures on background knowledge are turned into knowledge clips to be repeated each year. Lecturers have more time to teach novel insights to students in an interactive setting in the form of a hybrid classroom. Practicals are given on-site, while also having an online counterpart. Working groups can be blended as well. Individual writing assignments are taught online-only. Teachers are available on pre-set hours for online or on-site discussions with students. Exams are digital at home or at campus. Despite being partly online, teaching will remain small-scale and personal.

Advantages

- Courses are accessible to students around the globe.
- Better access to education at WUR for students with (severe) disabilities.
- The use of knowledge clips helps students to effectively acquire required knowledge.
- Lectures and knowledge clips are watched at students' convenience.
- Knowledge clips are recorded at the convenience of the lecturer.
- Opportunities to learn from video, reading, lecture, and individual and group discussions.
- Two teachers per hybrid classroom—one for on-site and the other one online.
- More integration and collaboration of different chair groups and science groups.
- Students participate via live discussions or online chats, giving students with different backgrounds and personalities tools that work for them.

Implementation

- To be able to participate, students have to be registered at WUR. Courses are only accessible to registered students.
- For online practical/in-depth online working groups, students may, for example, make documentaries, re-analyse published datasets, or do outreach for society.
- Groups are kept small to facilitate efficient interactions both on-site and online.
- The addition of online-only students will result in less on-site students which will result in maintaining the small-scale and good student – teacher interaction on campus.
- Investments and support needed for recording of knowledge clips and additional online material is available.
- Additional assistants hired to help setup online counterpart of practicals.
- Practicals and other online materials are reviewed and revised every 5 years.

2b. Teaching is tailored to students' interests and capabilities.

All classes have multiple layers of difficulty and depth. Students can choose whether they follow standard course or the in-depth version. Their choices are reflected on the graduation diploma. Practicals are optional, depending on the study.

Advantages

- Students that plan on working in companies, advisory bureaus, and/or whose career choices do not necessarily benefit from doing practical work may opt for a theoretical study only. This can be fully online, or hybrid.
- The international nature of WUR is solidified even more, as good students around the globe can follow courses or entire curricula from home. The need to travel across the world is minimized.
- Students have more autonomy of their learning and the type and difficulty of the different courses they take. As each course is chosen by the students, this ensures higher motivation.

Implementations

- Students that graduate without doing practical work get a special diploma, clearly stating that they had a theoretical study only.
- Courses that are taken at in-depth level get a star annotation of the grading list. Following 75% star courses means an additional indication on diploma.
- A logical set of courses is presented to students for specific curricula but all courses are optional. It is up to the students to get the background requirements clear for each course they take. Teachers offer clear indication of background knowledge assumed.
- Courses are designed together with the educational office. Teachers provide their in-depth knowledge of the subject, educational staff offers their in-depth knowledge of setting up clear teaching activities and assessment strategies.
- Tight monitoring needs to be implemented to ensure that the value of each WUR diploma meets WUR's standards of educational excellence.



3. Work-life balance

In 2030, one wall in the conference rooms is a communicative screen through which PIs coordinate their teams and organize blended online/offline meetings. This technology is always available to team members for meetings with collaborators around the globe. The university offers a tailor-made workplace that suits the individual needs for a diverse group of researchers and teachers.

3a. Personalized workspace package.

Each person is different, and so are their tasks. Some tasks can only be done at campus, while other tasks can also be done from home. In 2030, WUR offers personalized workspaces, so employees work in an optimal environment and make most efficient use of campus space. People who work largely from home will get a financial compensation to organize their home office. People who work mainly on campus will have a personal workplace there.

Advantages

- People create their personal optimal work environment and working hours.
- Freedom to choose the working conditions will create a positive work environment.
- Accommodating staff needs will lead to greater infrastructure efficiency.

Implementations

- Workspace needs are discussed at the start of the contract and reassessed yearly during the Results and Development interview.
- Support to setup an office at home if using only flexible working spaces on campus.
- People that prefer or need to work mainly on campus get a fixed working spot.
- Connection within groups facilitated through 'everybody on campus' moments are planned per group, e.g. on weekly or two-weekly basis. Enough space for this is accommodated by using flex spots or meeting rooms which are shared with neighboring groups.
- Flexibility has the risk that the boundary between work and personal life may start to fade. To allow people to take ownership of their own working conditions, new social norms are established. For example, people decide when they want to receive their emails, e.g. emails received in the weekend are held until Monday. People are not expected to respond to email day and night, instead people communicate when they are available.

3b. Diverse and functional workspaces on campus.

WUR has the high-quality software, equipment, and rooms for blended on-line/off-line meetings. This facilitates blended (group)meetings, meetings with remote collaborators, conferences, etc.

Advantages

- The technology is accessible to facilitate teamwork with team members around the globe.
- Teamwork is possible for people who are not at the same location.
- Travelling is reduced.

Implementation

- Sufficient meeting rooms of varied sizes allow for staff to work without being disturbed.
- High quality online meeting software allows people to choose the best options for their situation.
- All workspaces are outfitted with state-of-the-art cameras, screens, speakers, and microphones that allow for high-quality, blended meetings.



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