



Students helping students  
**An initiative for Student Wellbeing**

From Student Party SAM  
To the university council  
10 October 2019

## Introduction

More and more students are dealing with mental issues like stress which can have a negative impact on both their academic and social lives. Student wellbeing is a much-discussed topic, but it is a very abstract and complex subject that covers many different situations.

As a university that seeks to advance society by focussing on a number of challenging strategic themes, such as 'enhancing health and wellbeing', we should actually be at the forefront in the field of student wellbeing. Tilburg University wants to be a good university for students with limitations and actively assist students with mental health issues, however, in contrast to other major topics, the university does not yet seem to have a clear policy with concrete objectives in the area of student wellbeing. One of the themes of our Impact Program is actually enhancing health and wellbeing. Our university even offers a master's degree in Health, Wellbeing and Society. We have an impact program, a master degree specialized in wellbeing and many employees with a huge amount of knowledge about improving wellbeing, so why are we not using their expertise for our own university and students? Tilburg University wants to be a university that not only understands but also advances society. Tilburg University could play a pioneering role in this matter. Actively using our knowledge to contribute to a solution for this challenge does not only benefit the students for whom the university is responsible, but other universities can also learn from our best practices.

We know that eventually the Vision on Student Well-being will be further elaborated in an Action Plan but we want to speed up this process, because our students (and employees) deserve to be supported in a timely, clearly and correct way. We therefore want the university to set up a taskforce focusing on student wellbeing to develop concrete action lines based on the Vision Student Well-being. Student Party SAM would like to participate in the taskforce.

In addition, we want to offer an idea that could be included as one of the concrete goals of the action lines. We believe that sometimes, students may simply need insights and help from someone who knows what it is like to study at Tilburg University. Besides that, we think that many students find it helpful to first connect with a peer counselor when they are unsure about whether they should seek the student psychologist. Therefore, student party SAM would like to set up a student-to-student peer counseling program where students can talk to a volunteer student counselor and join group activities and sessions organised by student counselors. We would like to emphasise that the main goal of this program is to let students empower their fellow students, not to diagnose them. This program is inspired by the student-to-student peer counseling program ELTE Kortárs which is part of the Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary). We have contact with a student who could explain to us the working and the success of the program.

## Peer counseling program

Peer support can be defined as support provided by and for people with similar experiences and problems. The idea for this peer counseling program is to create an environment in which students can discuss their struggles with other students. This, by designing a peer counseling program where a group of selected students are trained to help their fellow students. These peer counselors offer feedback, can lend an ear and refer students to other campus services depending on their needs. They can help students sort out their feelings and thoughts in an accessible way.

The students should be given the opportunity to schedule individual sessions with one of the peer counselors but also join group sessions and activities organised by the peer counselors. These group sessions and activities can help students realise that they are not alone, validates their experiences and reduces the feeling of isolation. By listening to the stories of others, students can discover a whole range of different perspectives and strategies.

The selected group of counselors students should be delivered a comprehensive training with the correct set of skills and knowledge to help their fellow students. Giving peer support also has benefits for student peer counselors themselves. Besides the unique experience of helping fellow students, being a peer counselor can provide valuable new skills which contribute to their own personal development. Think about for example, listening skills, reflective skills and problem solving skills. But also learning how to define problems and evaluate changes.

In many cases students need professional treatment that peer groups can't provide. A good peer program understands when they've reached the limits of their own ability to help. That's why it is important that the student counselors should be able to recognize disconcerting behaviours and thoughts that need to receive professional help immediately. In this way, peer support can be a beneficial addition alongside the professional service of student psychologists. We want to emphasise that this counseling model should be designed to let students empower their fellow students, not to diagnose them.

In order to ensure the smooth running of this program, it must include the following: comprehensive training for the student counselors, a set of rules for the student counselors, good supervision for the student counselors, integrating the program with other existing services for student wellbeing such as student psychologists and a clear visibility for the students in need of this program.

## Why a student-to-student peer counseling program is a great addition to our Tilburg Educational Profile

Tilburg University wants to distinguish itself by delivering students to society that have an ethical consciousness, think constructively about solutions and are driven by a strong sense of solidarity and a powerful capacity of empathy. Student Party SAM believes that setting up a student-to-student peer counseling program fits in well with our Tilburg Educational Profile. First of all, because this program fits in with the goal of mentoring our students to grow and develop themselves in a small-scale way. Again, we believe that sometimes students need a listening ear and insights from students who are experiencing studying at Tilburg University themselves. Second, because students, gathered from our own student population, are being motivated to help their fellow students. While helping others, they develop a stronger feeling of empathy, solidarity and an ethical responsibility themselves. These skills and experiences are valuable and fit in with both the pillars character and skills.

### What we want

Student Party SAM would like the university to set up a taskforce focusing on student wellbeing. In this taskforce, action lines should be developed. SAM would like to offer to participate in the taskforce. We also want to offer one concrete idea that could be included in the action plans.

If it is the case that the well-being of students is under pressure, Tilburg University wants this to be identified at an early stage so that students can be supported and referred in a timely and correct manner where necessary<sup>1</sup>. We believe that giving students the opportunity to talk with fellow students who have the correct set of skills to do so, is a good addition to other facilities that we have at our campus. Therefore, student Party SAM would like to look into the possibilities of setting up a student-to-student peer counseling program which is accessible for all students. We believe that this program is a positive growth and learning opportunity for both the student counselors as well as the students who need help.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vision on Student Well-being, p.1