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To: The Executive Board of the University of Groningen
From: The 10th faction of Lijst Calimero
Date: 4 januari 2015
Subject: Urgent letter 'Feeling at home in Groningen'

Feeling at home in Groningen

Through this letter, Lijst Calimero takes the opportunity to draw the attention of the Board of the University towards some of the most urging problems regarding the housing of international students in Groningen. Since the housing office is replaced by the SSH, this is the moment to address these problems to make sure that these mistakes will not be made again by the new accommodation provider. Although Lijst Calimero is aware of the fact that housing may not be a primary task of the university, it is essential for a university to be able to offer students suitable and qualitatively good accommodation to stay appealing for international students. This will only become more important for the University of Groningen since one of its main issues for the upcoming years will be internationalisation. International students are dissatisfied about the housing facilities, which are offered for several years now. The fact that a recently created Facebook page¹ where students can share their experiences about the housing office became popular so quickly, shows that the students also start to undertake action themselves and that the situation urgently needs to be improved. In this letter we will address the main problems, which international students encounter with regard to the housing that is provided by the Housing Office at the moment. We therefore urge the board to undertake the necessary steps to address these problems.

Provision of information

The university should provide adequate information about how and where to find housing outside of the SSH. Since the SSH does not have the capacity to accommodate all incoming international students, it would be good to give international students the possibility to choose between different kinds of housing to enable them to compare accommodations in order to make the best choice. In the current situation, the main focus of the university is on offering information about SSH. The 'Welcome to Groningen Guide' for example, only offers a chapter about the Housing Office as it comes to finding accommodation. Also, on the UoG website there is not much information about how and where to find housing outside of SSH. Most international students have difficulties finding a room in Groningen by themselves, for the simple fact that

¹ Experiences from Groningen's Housing Office.
<https://www.facebook.com/housingofficeresidents?fref=ts> (accessed December 19, 2014).

they are not aware of all the possibilities. To tackle this problem, we advise the board of the UoG to improve the information on the website and in the welcoming guides. This can be done by defining all different accommodators and by explaining the differences between finding accommodation through a real estate agent, a housing cooperative, or the private housing market. In addition, websites like kamernet.nl or special groups on Facebook often help students to find suitable housing.

Capacity problems

Especially in the first semester many students try to find accommodation, causing all rooms of the housing office to be quickly reserved. A big improvement of the new website of SSH will be that students will have the possibility to choose a room instead of being assigned one. However, the number of rooms that are being offered is rather low compared to the number of incoming international students. Therefore, the choice students have will be limited. In addition, the number of rooms available will only decrease in the short term since some of the buildings offering accommodation will be renovated and others, like the Diaconessenhuis, will even be closed. Therefore, we urge the Board of the University to make clear agreements with SSH on how to address the increasing capacity problems caused by the renovations and on how to enlarge the overall number of accommodations offered by the SSH to make sure that free choice for international students will be ensured in the future.

An additional capacity problem is caused by the plans of the board of the university to accommodate participants of summer schools in the rooms that are available for international students. This would be a good solution for the problem of unoccupied rooms in July and August. However, the board should keep in mind that students who are starting their semester at the beginning of the academic year, in September, might want to move to Groningen in August. Lijst Calimero thinks international students should also be given the opportunity to move to Groningen before September to enable them to take part in introduction activities such as the KEI week. We therefore would advise the board to ensure the rooms are available for them from mid-august onward.

Handling of complaints

Another problem that should be solved is the manner in which problems and complaints are being resolved. If students have complaints they should contact their student managers, who should act as care takers. The student managers will contact the Housing Office, so that they can solve the problem. Unfortunately it often takes very long to solve these problems. There are many examples of students that are left without heating, internet or water for a couple of days. This is absolutely unacceptable. Some international students tried to contact the Housing Office themselves by mail or Facebook when their complaints were ignored for several days, mostly without success. Mails remain unanswered and Facebook messages do not help either as shown by the following example.² A student in Moestraat complains on Monday morning about not having hot water for a full day. The Housing Office replies two days later, with an unhelpful answer. Of course the student already contacted the student manager about the problem, and the student manager in his turn has already contacted the Housing Office.

² Experiences from Groningen's Housing Office.

<https://www.facebook.com/housingofficeresidents/photos/a.965734783455400.1073741826.965727640122781/967482336613978/?type=1&theater> (accessed December 19, 2014).



Quality of housing

The manner in which complaints are handled by the Housing Office is even more painful because of the overall lack of quality of the housing accommodation that is being offered. Broken toilets, mold and the lack of a decent internet connection are unfortunately only a few of the problems international students encounter in their houses. Since there are many long term problems, and the general maintenance of the student accommodations should also be urgently improved, we urge the board to make clear arrangements with SSH about the terms in which complaints of students should be dealt with. Furthermore, the board needs to make sure that the quality of the housing facilities will improve, in order to ensure a good quality of living for the international students.

Contracts and legal position of students

The main reason that the previously mentioned problems regarding the resolving of complaints and the quality of housing can occur for several years in a row, is in our opinion the legal status of international students that is restricted by the contract that they have to sign. At the moment there is a contract which ensures them accommodation for only a limited stay. This contract not only causes that students cannot stay in their rooms when they are not longer registered at the university, but also deteriorates their legal position. It disqualifies them from contesting the amount of rent that they have to pay for a room and their opportunity to file their complaints at a rent committee. The contract thus forces international students to undertake much more expensive and complex procedures to address the atrocities that they encounter. An example that shows that international student are disadvantaged by this, is that the rent that is being asked from them for rooms at the buildings at the Kornoeljestraat is much higher than the rent that people have to pay for living in the same buildings that are build next to theirs. Yet, students

cannot change this because of the nature of their contract. In addition, there is a lack of transparency with regard to the a breakdown of the service costs, which makes it impossible for students to see if the prices they have to pay for their rooms are justifiable. The fact that the students are international and only live in Groningen for a relative short period also makes it harder for them to file a lawsuit. Lijst Calimero thinks that international students should have the same rights as Dutch students and that they should have equal opportunity to address the quality and the price of the housing that is offered to them by the Housing Office or SSH.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lijst Calimero urges the Board of the University to utilize the transition from the Housing Office to the SSH to solve the previously mentioned problems about the provision of information concerning the ways to find an accommodation, the shortage of rooms that are available, the time span in which complaints of students are being handled, the quality of the housing that is being offered at the moment and the legal position of the students. It is important to note that we see this letter mainly as a first step in the process that is needed to improve the living conditions of many international students that are studying in Groningen at the moment and the students that will take their places in the future. In this process we hope to cooperate with all students, associations and actors that feel affiliated with this subject to finally come to a real solution for this problem.

The 10th faction of Lijst Calimero

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