

A PLACE TO BELONG:

Exploring how young people experience third places in Wageningen

ACT Team 3729

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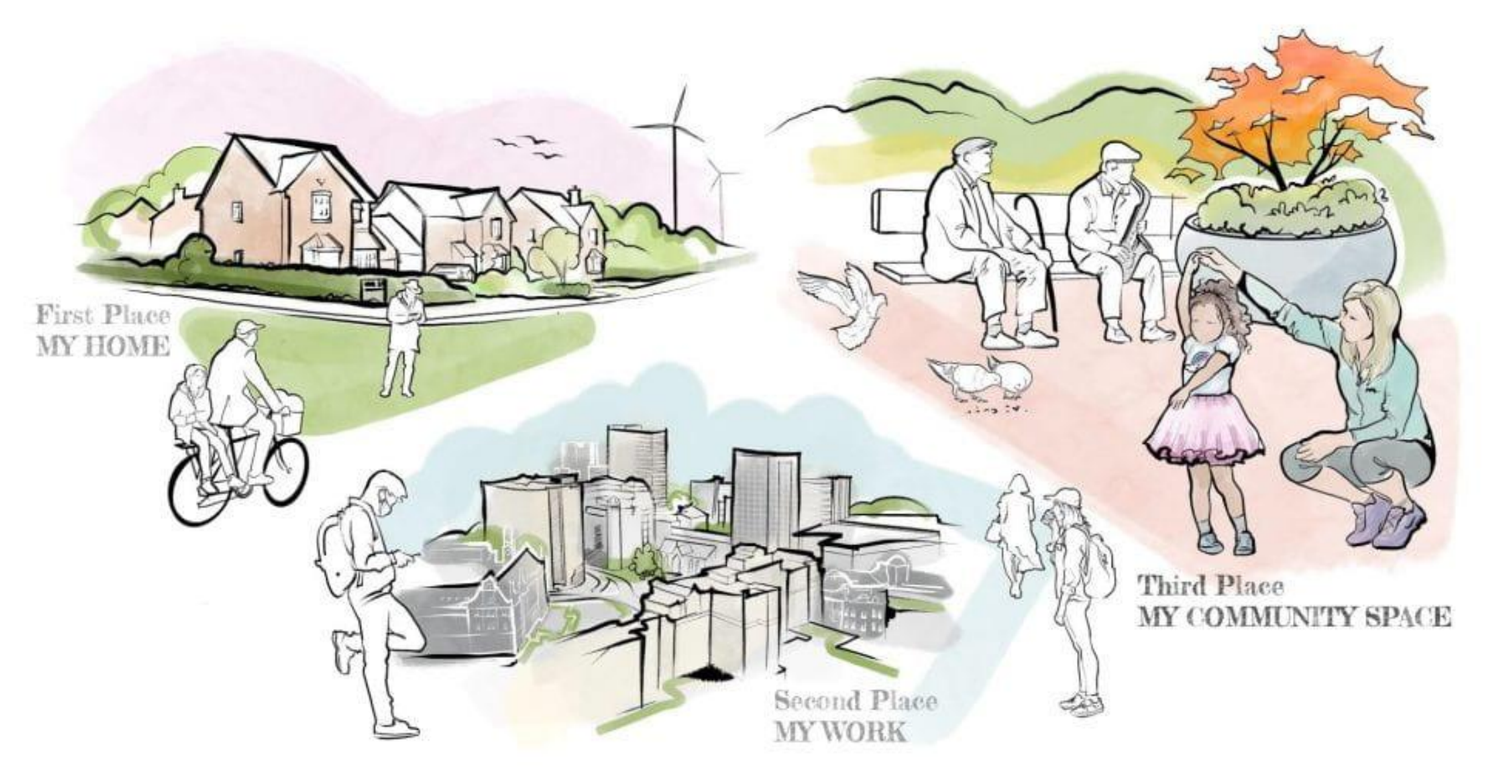
2) Our Research

3) Key Findings

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1) Introduction



"2021 Cat A – My Third Place," IFLA Europe Youth Competition, 2021, Image retrieved from https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/

What is a third place?

- Informal, public, and semi-public places outside home and school/work
- E.g. sports clubs, cafés, libraries, parks, cultural venues, etc.
- Build social cohesion, community, belonging, wellbeing

Why do they matter?

- Mental health challenges, feelings of loneliness and isolation among youth
- Third places = social infrastructure
- Foster sociability, trust, belonging, cohesion
- Reduce isolation and loneliness
- Support mental well-being

2) Our Research

Problem statement

- Knowledge gap on how third places are experienced, used, and valued by youth
- Students and non-students often live in parallel social worlds
- How can physical spaces and information access be improved?

Our project

- Qualitative study on youth (18–27) in Wageningen, students and non-students
- Semi-structured interviews with 17 young people + 9 organizations
- Goal: experiences, needs, barriers, practical recommendations

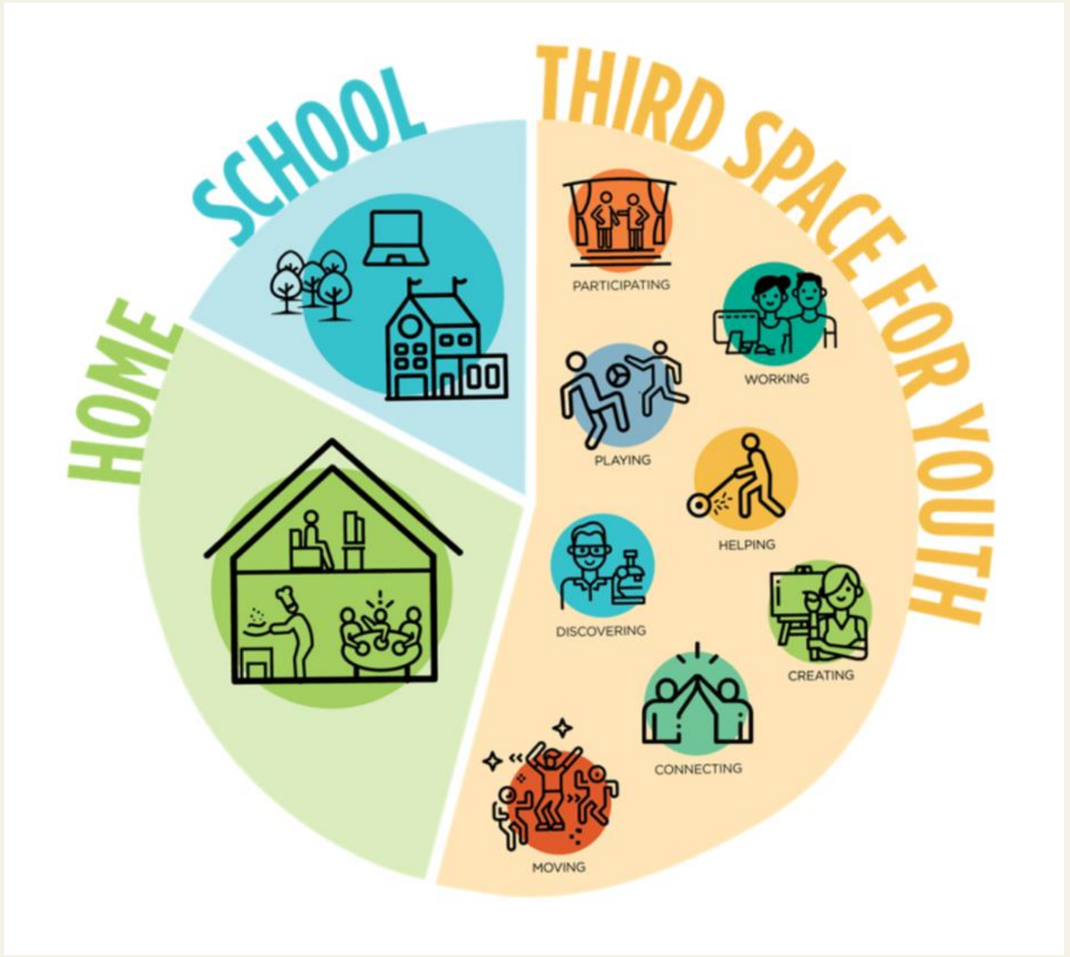


Image retrieved from https://livableraleigh.com/so-close-yet-so-far-disconnection-in-a-connected-world/

➤ **In sum:** Wageningen youth face well-being challenges, third places can help — but access & awareness are uneven. Need qualitative insight → better places, better connection



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with youth and local organizations

THREE DIMENSIONS OF YOUTH EXPERIENCE IN THIRD PLACES

Theoretical framework: what young people think, feel and do

---

01 WHAT YOUTH THINK

COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE

How young people perceive and interpret a third place

- Perceptions and associations
- Identity and meaning
- Usefulness and importance
- Atmosphere and social fit

02 HOW YOUTH FEEL

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

How being in a third place makes young people feel

- Comfort and feeling welcome
- Safety and sense of security
- Sense of belonging
- Enjoyment and excitement
- Nervousness and social anxiety

03 WHAT YOUTH DO

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIENCE

How young people use, interact with and discover third places

- Activities and frequency
- Reasons for attending
- Ways of participating
- Discovery and information sources

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES ACROSS ALL THREE DIMENSIONS

ACCESIBILITY AND VISIBILITY

Can young people find, enter, and participate in these places easily?

SOCIAL MEANING AND WELL-BEING

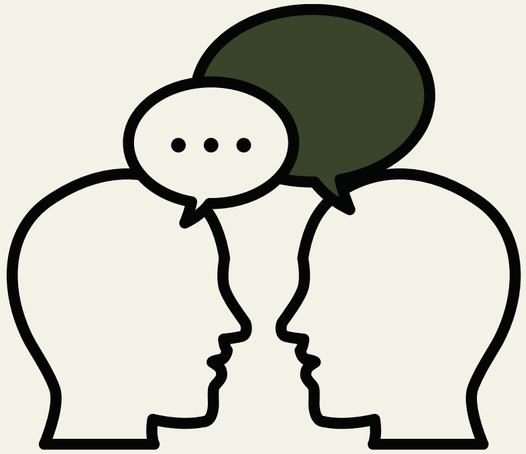
Do these places support connection, belonging and well-being?



WHO DID WE TALK TO?

An Overview of our Interview Participants

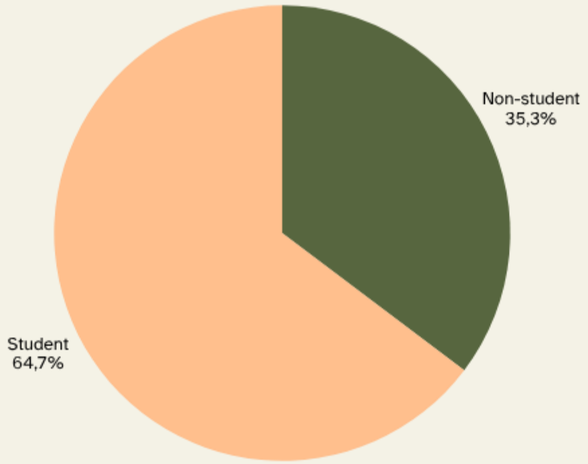
Interview Overview



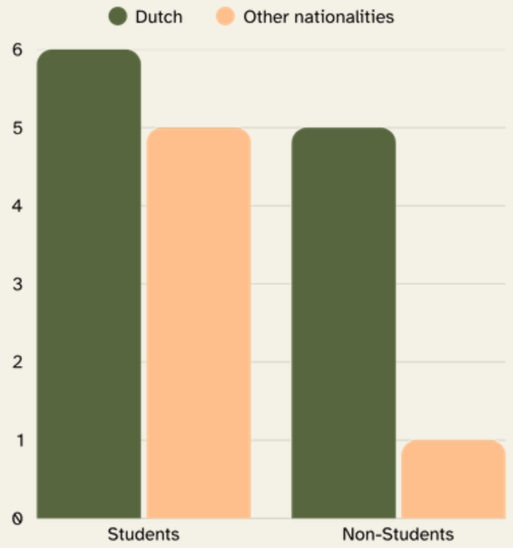
Total Interviews	Youth Participants	Organizations
26	17	9

Youth

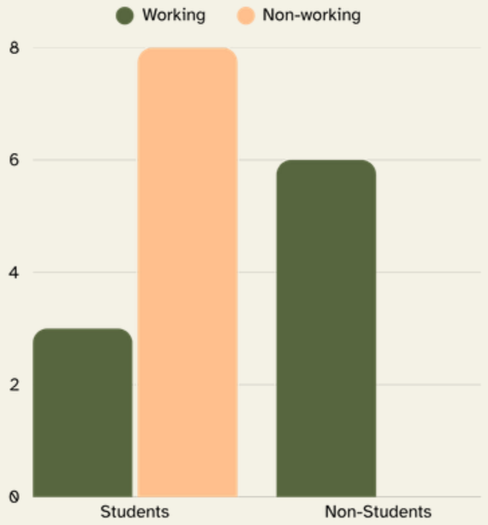
Student Status



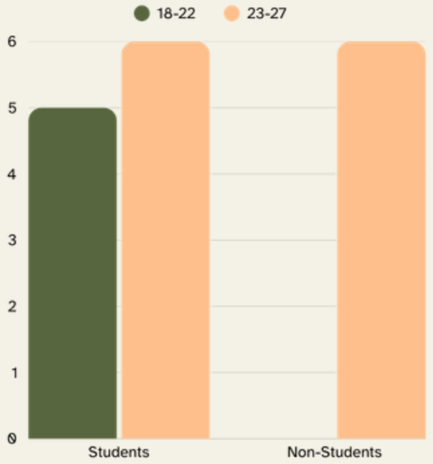
Nationality



Working Status



Age



Organizations & Stakeholders

identified themselves as;

Meeting spot	1
Café/Bar/Restaurant	1
Social organization	2
Public library	1
Student association	1
Cultural initiative	1
Independent Organizer	2



OUR FINDINGS

An Overview of Youth Experiences and Organizations' Observations

Findings



Youth Experiences and Organizations' Observations

A) EXPERIENCING THIRD PLACES

1. Behavioural experience
2. Emotional experience
3. Cognitive Experience

B) BARRIERS TO SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND BELONGING

1. Accesibility and Visibility
2. Social meaning and Mental Wellbeing
3. Language and cultural inclusion
4. Limited Social Spaces and Opportunities

C) CONNECTING THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

1. Food as a bridge to connect



ORGANIZATIONS’ GOALS AND PERSPECTIVES

i. Creating Inclusive Spaces & Bridging Social Divides
ii. Challenges & the Municipality's Role

Key Terms from the interviews

Student-only places and membership barriers

Social Anxiety

Student vs. Non-student Divide

Lack of Informal Meeting Spaces

Early Closing Hours

Accesibility and Visibility

Loneliness and Well-being

Emotional connection to place

Limited nightlife

Lack of resources

Language and Cultural Inclusion

Food as a social connector

Belonging and Community feeling

Financial Barriers

A) EXPERIENCING THIRD PLACES



“I’m not really someone who goes **alone**, so I always want to go there **with people**. **Only they also have to have time.”**

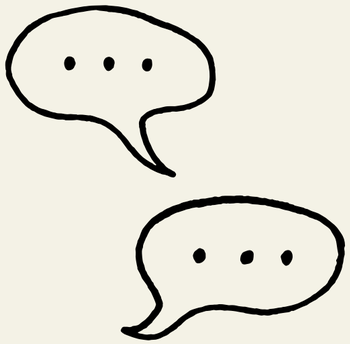
-Y3 (non-student)

1 BEHAVIORAL EXPERIENCE

- **Participation often depends on friends' availability.**
- **Students frequently organize activities through their own communities.**

"I notice that when other people are busy, I just spend most of my time in my room. Or I go find something for myself, like climbing."

– Y1(student)



"I'm not really someone who goes alone, so I always want to go there with people. **Only they also have to have time."**

-Y3 (non-student)

"If we don't organize activities, then there are no activities, and then it gets really boring here."

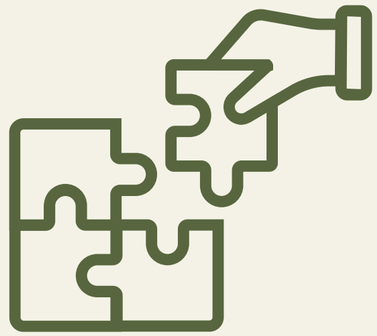
-Y16 (student)

“If I didn't have a friend group with me, that could be one barrier because, yeah, I would feel a bit intimidated to enter a room full of unfamiliar faces.”

- Y7 (Student)

2

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE



- **Comfort and belonging come mainly from the people present.**
- **Established groups can intimidate or exclude newcomers.**
- **Open and mixed environments foster the feeling of safety and inclusion.**

"If I didn't have a friend group with me, that could be one barrier because, yeah, I would feel a bit intimidated to enter a room full of unfamiliar faces."

- Y7 (Student)

"Well, that you get seen, I think. In Utrecht I'm nobody to the people behind the bar, here I am somebody."

-Y14, non-student

"If I miss the yoga, then I'm sad because I like the yoga, but also because I don't get to see these people."

-Y8 , student

“It's a student town where everybody knows each other, or knows of each other. *If you're in it, it's lovely, and if you fall outside of it, well, then there's not much.*”

-Y14 , non-student

3

COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE

"It's a student town where everybody knows each other, or knows of each other. If you're in it, it's lovely, and if you fall outside of it, well, then there's not much."
-Y14 , non-student

"So you have different bubbles living alongside each other without really touching or mixing with each other."
-Y15 , student

"Now that I'm no longer a student I'm in principle no longer allowed to go to parties or going-out places where only students are welcome."
-Y3, Non-student

"It's quite separated. [...] You have to show your student pass to get into the venue. [...] Otherwise you cannot get in or you have to know someone."
— Y12, Non-student



Wageningen is perceived as cozy and peaceful, but divided into social bubbles.

Youth tend to hang out more within their own social circles.

Social life is perceived as **largely student-oriented**, with students having more structured opportunities through university networks and associations.

Students and non-students experience the same city differently.

E.g., Non-students and graduates find fewer social and nightlife opportunities, particularly outside student communities.

Student-only spaces and activities reinforce the divide between students and non-students.

"It's a student town where everybody knows each other, or knows of each other. If you're in it, it's lovely, and if you fall outside of it, well, then there's not much."

-Y14 , non-student

"So you have different bubbles living alongside each other without really touching or mixing with each other."

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-Y3, Non-student

"It's quite separated. [...] You have to show your student pass to get into the venue. [...] Otherwise you cannot get in or you have to know someone."

— Y12, Non-student



B) BARRIERS TO SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND BELONGING

“I think that if you have a lot of contacts and are in those WhatsApp groups or Telegram groups, you really have enough information. But **if you don’t have such an extensive network**, it may be a bit harder to find things to do.” -

- Y15 (student)

4 ACCESIBILITY & VISIBILITY

- **Information mainly circulates through friends, group chats and personal networks. There is no single accessible source for everyone.**
- **Those with fewer social connections, or simply the ones that don't know where to look at, struggle to discover activities.**
- **Financial costs and student-only access restrictions create additional barriers to social participation.**

Y15 — Student | Personal networks

"If you don't have such an extensive network, it may be a bit harder to find things to do."

Y14 — Non-student | Difficulty discovering activities

"I hear about it by chance. [...] I'd like to do more, but I don't really know where to look."

Y12 — Non-student | Financial barriers

"But everything got so expensive, so now we just hang out at home."

Y5 — Student | Missing opportunities

"Many times I think I might miss an event and then see that it happened the previous Saturday."

Y2 | NEED FOR CENTRALIZED INFORMATION

"THE NICEST THING, I THINK, WOULD BE TO HAVE SOME KIND OF **OVERVIEW OR SCHEDULE OF ALL THE EVENTS** THAT YOU CAN DO."

“Loneliness is mostly seen as an issue among older people, but for young people it’s very much a problem too.”

-Y1 (student)

5

SOCIAL MEANING & MENTAL WELLBEING

- **Third places provide relief from study, work and everyday pressure.**
- **They help young people build social connections and a sense of belonging.**
- **Not being part of a community or lacking social connections may contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation.**
- **Graduates and non-students may struggle to find a sense of belonging outside established social structures.**

Y7 — Student | Mental wellbeing & belonging

"...they [third places] do rest your mind a bit from workload of university and work. And it's also important [...] to connect and to feel like you belong..."



Y14 — Non-student | Uncertainty of belonging

"It's more that I don't know where I belong myself. I'm not a student here anymore, but I'm also not someone who really lives here [...] I'm kind of in between."

Y5 — Student | Emotional relief

"I would definitely say [these places offer me] peace of mind because they can be like a comfort place [...] it offers me a break from everyday life, nice feelings..."

“..all the ads are in Dutch. So that's why I don't see them as well, because **I'm not a target audience.** So I do feel their absence a lot.”

-Y7 (student)

6 LANGUAGE & CULTURAL INCLUSION

"Our communication is **in English**. However, we did find out that Wageningen youth do feel excluded if communication is in English because it feels like a student thing. [...] In our heads, it's more inclusive to speak in a language that more people can speak so more people can show up. But **for Wageningen youth, that's often times it is a barrier.**"

-O7, Organization

"Outside of university I don't have places to go and socialize. [...] they're very Dutch oriented, maybe **all the ads are in Dutch.** So that's why I don't see them as well, because I'm not a target audience. So **I do feel their absence a lot.**"

-Y7 , student



- **English communication increases access for international students.**
- **On the other hand, communication in English can make local Dutch youth feel excluded.**
- **Inclusive communication must consider both Dutch and international audiences.**

“Usually it's one of our homes because I've noticed places here close quite early, so that's not comfortable sometimes to go out…”

-Y7 (student)

7

LIMITED SOCIAL SPACES AND OPPORTUNITIES

(EVENING PLACES, NIGHTLIFE, INFORMAL GATHERING SPOTS...)

"We're so busy during the day that we need these places specifically at night and in the evening, because during the day we can't join [...]"
-Y7 , student

"I think the opening hours. Everything closes so early."
- Y14, Non-student

"I don't go out more often because it's always the same place, so there's not much variety."

-Y5, student

"For nightlife, there's not one specific venue. [...] Even if I wanted to go more often, it's not really possible."
— Y12, Non-student

- **Youth lack informal, cozy spaces where they can socialize and spend time without obligations.**
- **Early closing hours and limited evening spaces restrict socializing outside the home, especially for people with busy daily schedules.**
- **Limited nightlife options, particularly for non-student youth, restrict opportunities for entertainment and socializing.**
- **Limited availability and variety of social spaces restrict participation and youth-led initiatives.**

“We're so busy during the day that we need these places specifically at night and in the evening, because during the day we can't join [...]”
-Y7 , student

“I think the opening hours. Everything closes so early.”
- Y14, Non-student

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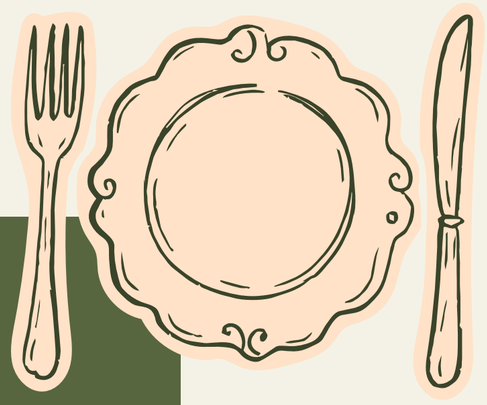
C) CONNECTING THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

“Food has no limits, basically. You don't need to understand the language, but then you can still connect over food.” -

-O6, Organization



8 FOOD AS A BRIDGE TO CONNECT



- **Shared meals encourage low-pressure social interaction.**
- **Food can connect people across language and cultural differences.**
- **Eating together can foster feelings of safety, belonging, and community.**

"It's really connecting over food. We do potluck sessions and then just get to know each other, really make it so that they feel safe and welcome, they don't feel lonely.."

-O6 , organization

"I feel like eating is a very connecting activity."

-O4, organization

"...there is so much to do here on Droevendaal, so much **social contact** and **shared-meal events** that are organised here, that I feel much less need to go to Wageningen to spend my free time there."

-Y15 , student



D) Organizations’ Goals & Perspectives

“THE CITY IS VERY MUCH CATERED TO STUDENTS AND MUCH LESS TO OTHER YOUTH.”
– 01 , ORGANIZATION

“So our main focus not only providing a space for both of them, but making sure that that's the same space that they're using.”
— 07 , organization

Creating Inclusive Spaces & Bridging Social Divides



Organizations highlight **the need for accessible, informal spaces** that encourage social interaction and belonging.

Shared spaces and activities **can help bridge the student–non-student divide**.

Inclusive environments should encourage connection across different youth groups.

“Where most projects that ultimately don't happen, it is due to a lack of space, I think.”

-O9, organization

“They [the municipality] need to give **structural support** or long-term talking with these organizations because they are very important to the city [...]”

-O5 , organization

Challenges & the Municipality's Role





Limited physical spaces and **financial resources** constrain youth initiatives.



Organizations call for **long-term municipal support, collaboration and greater flexibility.**



Administrative barriers can make organizing activities more **difficult**.

4) Recommendations



Activities and Space

1. Small Bookable Spaces & Kitchens
2. Low-Cost Place to Eat & Meet
3. Accessible Low-Threshold Sports
4. Practical Improvements to Public Spaces



Evening offer

1. Safeguard & Broaden the Evening Offer
2. Extend Evening Hours & Alcohol-Free Options

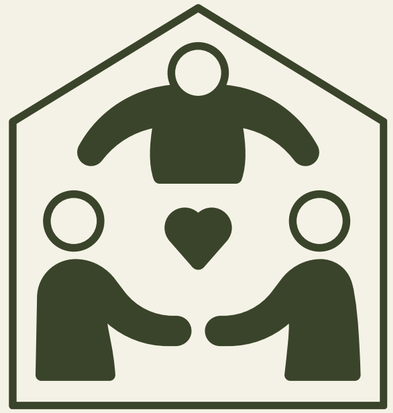


Communication

1. One Route to Find Out What's On

1. Small, bookable spaces with kitchens — easy to use, open to all young people





Key points:

- Lack of space = most-mentioned gap
- Existing rooms: long waits, residents-only, poorly equipped
- Need small, low-cost, short-notice bookable spaces
- Use existing buildings: community centers, library, Cultuurwerkplaats, WUR
- Lighter rules for small, low-risk gatherings

Quotes:

"Most projects that ultimately don't happen, it is due to a lack of space." — O9

"You really have to book two months in advance... and you can only book it if you really live here." — Y1 (student)

"The most important thing is that small plans are not held to the same rules as big plans." — O9



2. A low-cost place to eat and meet — especially in the evening

Key points:

- Eating out is too expensive for young people
- Evening gap: shops & cafeterias close 5–6PM
- Existing meal initiatives are limited to specific days
- Support existing kitchens/canteens to serve more evening meals
- Needs structural subsidy to keep prices low

Quotes:

"*A place to eat that doesn't cost twenty euros a plate.*" — Y14 (non-student) on what they miss

"*A student option [so that] you could have dinner for below 10 EUR.*" — Y10 (non-student) suggests

"*The cafeterias and most shops close at 5 or 6... classes usually end in the afternoon.*" — Y5 (student) on what prevents them from going

3. Support and promote low-threshold and accessible sport



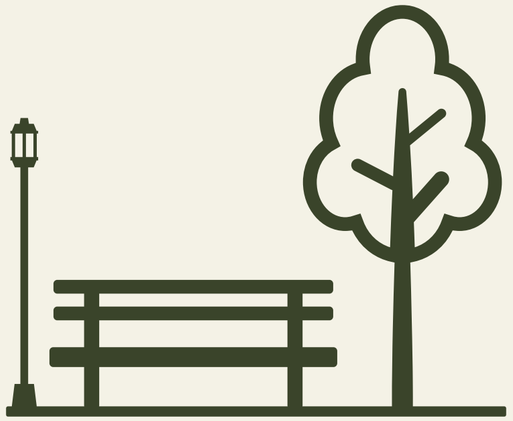
Key points:

- Sports support mental health, social contact, belonging
- Many activities are student-only or require De Bongerd membership
- Informal groups work
- Support spontaneous sports: beach volleyball, public football pitches
- Promote to graduates and non-student youth too

Quotes:

“[...]sports options require you to sign up and join a team. I think that can be hard for some people if you don't really have friends yet to sign up with a team [...] and joining a random team of people you don't know.” — Y1 (student)

"Group members can ask whether anyone wants to play, and those who are available can join." — Y1 (student), on a sports WhatsApp group they’re in



4. Practical improvements to public spaces — benches, lighting, communal tables, etc.

Key points:

- Simple fixes make public spaces more usable
- More benches, better lighting, public toilets
- Communal tables and outdoor meeting spaces
- Lighting and comfort affect evening use
- Low-cost social interaction without buying anything

Quotes & Suggestions:

"*Just boring and not quite chill.*" — Y16 (student), on being outside alone in the dark

O4 suggests a public space with communal tables where people can sit together and enjoy their food.

O5 mentioned there are currently very few places where people could meet without spending money.

5. Safeguard and broaden the evening offer — and ease permit rules



Key points:

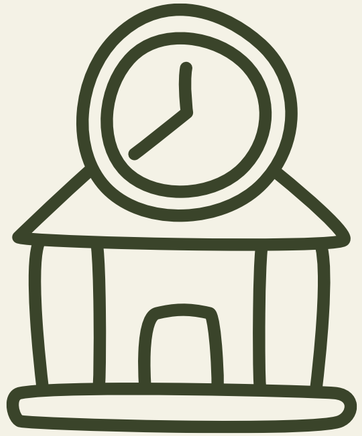
- Limited evening options outside student associations
- De Bunker and Woeste Hoeve are important — alternatives needed
- Limited music variety
- Permits are costly, slow, and require safety plans
- Ease permits for smaller events; support and diversify venues

Quotes & Suggestions:

O2 (café) mentioned obtaining permission for outdoor events and playing music was not possible

O9 described how permits have to be applied for months in advance, are costly and need a specific safety plan, making hosting open events difficult.

Y12 (non-student) explained how the lack of a designated space made it more difficult to attend 0317 events



6. Extend evening opening hours of non-nightlife places & increase non-alcohol options

Key points:

- Limited in-between options between home and nightlife
- Places close early; library evening access is activity-only
- Even a café open until 8PM would help
- Poor alcohol-free drink choices at some venues
- Extend existing places; offer affordable food and alcohol-free options
- Reduce dependence on drinking culture

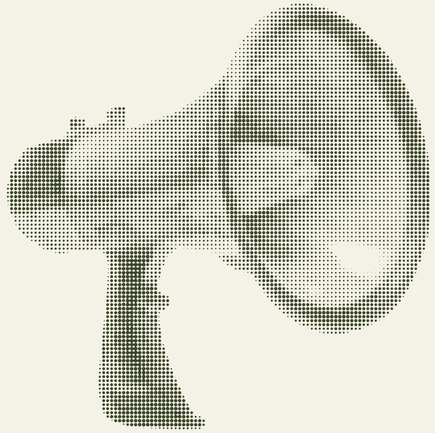
Quotes:

"If you're just not in a student association or you don't want to get hammered, sometimes there's really nothing to do." — Y2

"Places here close quite early... it closes very early so then we would have to leave [and go to someone's house]." — Y7 (international student)

"Youth specifically doesn't come here that much, and that has everything to do with our opening hours, because we're open 9–5 on weekdays." — O1

7. One route to find out what's on — in Dutch and English



Key points:

- Information travels through personal networks
- Newcomers, non-students, internationals miss out
- Language barriers
- Shared calendar: extend and promote uitinwageningen.nl
- Municipal Instagram + WhatsApp weekly overview
- Dutch and English, at least one week ahead
- Posters in non-student venues; easier flyering rules

Quotes:

"*Always through someone else.*" — Y11 (student), on how they hear about events

"*If your group is small, you get to know about fewer things.*" — Y10 (non-student), on networks

"*Maybe all the ads are in Dutch... I don't see them as well, because I am not a target audience.*" — Y7 (international student)

"*What there is to do this autumn.*" — Y15, suggesting a printed booklet

https://www.resource-online.nl/index.php/2025/08/13/eerste-wur-editie-freedom-walks-wageningen/



Thank you!

For Your Attention