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Ballots and International students: not an easy match

**To accommodate voters, the municipality in Groningen gave a chance to vote in local council elections already two days before the election day, 16th of March. What were other local actions for international students to be part of the voting group?**

"Everyone who lives in Groningen should be able to call this place home. Every citizen matters. Feeling at home in Groningen means being able to participate in your community", said Robbert, part of the Team Online of GroenLinks, when describing his party's involvement in reaching out to international students.

The elections in Groningen are part of Dutch municipal elections, and with coronavirus pandemic restrictions lifted, the municipalities hoped for a big turnout.

In Groningen, one group often seemed to be addressed in this year's campaigns by the political parties and the municipality itself – the international students.

Among other internationals living in the Netherlands, the international students are eligible to vote if they are over 18, citizens of the EU and registered with their local municipality. Students coming from abroad make up nearly 25% of students studying at RUG, a public research university in the city, and they are a big part of cities' life.

To involve this big group in the voting process, parties and organizations took many initiatives in the city.

Groningen Municipality, on their website, provided a link for [StemWijzer](#), a sort of an online quiz that helps find out which party is close to someone's political preferences. To make it accessible also for internationals, StemWijzer is also available in English.

The parties also tried to engage the internationals in their campaigns. [Many](#) provided their manifestos in both Dutch and English.

"Together with our youth party, we went canvassing in international student housing. We informed the internationals about their rights to vote and where they could find the information", added Robbert from GroenLinks.

The city council and various organizations also contributed to informing the international students. A [debate in English](#) at Forum, a cultural hub in the city, was one of the events organized in Groningen. Other debates, including those managed by organizations such as AEGEE and Esperia, also aimed to get international students' attention.

GroenLinks's representatives were one of many from political parties to attend those events.

"Additionally, we were the party to urge the municipality to start an outreach program informing these [international] students about their right to vote and urging them to register

here on time. This was honoured by the Gemeente, which let to both physical and digital advertising addressing these students.", explained Robbert from GroenLinks.

Gemeente, the Municipality, also sent out a voting pass to the home addresses of those registered in the city.

However, these efforts have not consistently achieved their intended purpose. Alex, a musician in the band Wing It and a student at one of the Master's programs at RUG, did not attend any events organized in the city.

"I found out I was eligible to vote when my friends talked about it. I didn't know before that, as my voting papers had not arrived yet", he explained.

Alex would like to vote; however, he could not cast his ballot.

"I would like to vote, but unfortunately, mail management in my building is s\*\*t, and the papers were never delivered to us", he said, describing his situation.

GroningenLife, an organization that helps both Dutch and International students discover the city, initially did not reach out to students to inform them that they could vote.

"It is indeed smart to spread the word as not all internationals know what to do or even know that it is possible [to vote] for them as well", said Vera van der Meer, Project Coordinator at GroningenLife.

After I contacted them for an interview, they decided to post a story to raise awareness of the possibility of voting. The quickly published story went up live on the afternoon of the election day.

*Some of the stories which were posted on GroningenLife's Instagram on the day of the elections*



"It might not be so obvious for internationals that they can vote. If you don't check your mailbox that often, don't hear friends talking about it or see it in a newspaper." Vera van der Meer said, agreeing to the need to spread the word about the elections.

"For next elections, we will try to come up with a clearer plan about what we want to do beforehand. I think it is important for internationals to vote as it is also their city. They are also 'Groningers', even if it is just for a year", she added. "I think it is good that everyone votes because we can! And we should make use of this opportunity."

The organization didn't have any international students contacting them, but a few international friends contacted Vera personally. They asked her for guidance about the parties and the elections themselves.

The turnout in the whole country was barely over 50%, with Groningen's figure around 54,5%. The figures are lower than expected.