

University of Groningen

Een slimmer academisch jaar

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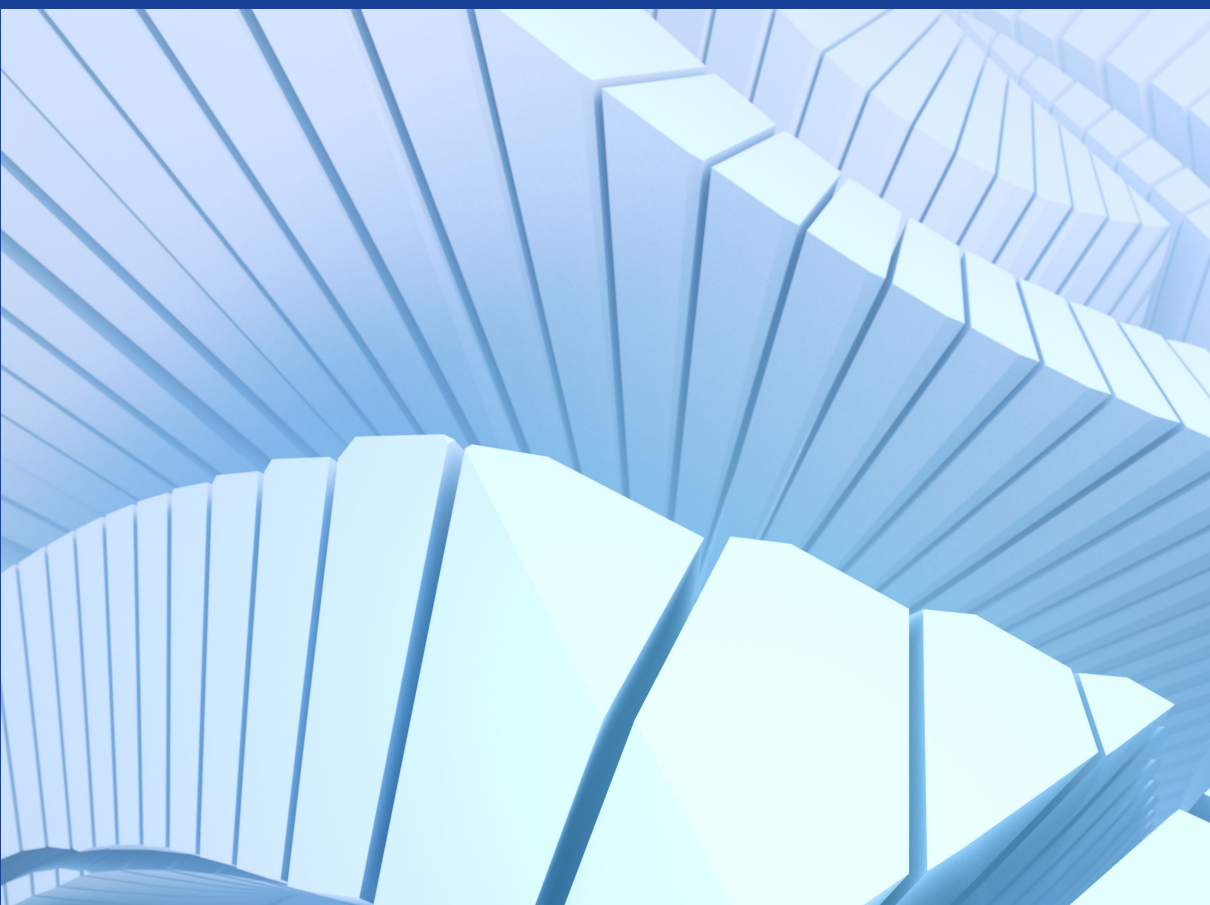
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DE JONGE AKADEMIE



A SMARTER ACADEMIC YEAR





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SUMMARY

In this report, we examine the structure of the academic year at Dutch universities from an international perspective, and we make recommendations for a smarter academic year in the Netherlands.

We find that students and instructors in the Netherlands often consider the academic year to be extremely long. For academic staff, this means that all their core duties – research, teaching, impact, managerial tasks (and perhaps patient care) – demand their attention concurrently almost throughout the year, leading to inefficiency and a further worsening of the already enormous pressure of work. For students, the academic year at many Dutch universities offers no respite whatsoever between September and the following July. This causes fatigue and stress, and it also deprives students of the opportunity for reflection and broadening of their studies.

A comparison with six prestigious universities in other European countries – comparable to the Dutch universities in terms of performance and breadth – shows that the Dutch academic year is indeed exceptionally long: Dutch instructors spend on average two entire months more per year on teaching or examining than their colleagues at the universities in the sample.

Based on our analysis of the academic year in the Netherlands and elsewhere, we identify a number of best practices and make five recommendations for a smarter academic year in the Netherlands. We recommend (1) adapting the academic year flexibly to the needs of different disciplines, (2) reducing the number of teaching weeks and (3) the number of test weeks, (4) strictly ‘protecting’ teaching-free periods, and (5) diversifying teaching methods and encouraging student autonomy.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

Studies and questionnaires show that no fewer than 72% of the academic staff at Dutch universities feel that the work pressure is heavy or very heavy.¹ The work pressure they experience is primarily the result of a disproportionate instructor-student ratio and a shortage of, in particular, permanent academic staff.² A serious reduction of the workload will definitely require additional funding.

In addition to a disproportionate instructor-student ratio, there is however another factor that would seem to contribute to the heavy workload perceived by Dutch academic staff, namely the length and structure of the academic year.³ Most Dutch universities begin their academic year in the first week of September and finish it in the following mid-June or early July. In between, there are few if any breaks, meaning that the academic year is perceived as being long and too full. An instructor at Maastricht University commented:

I recently joined the Dutch university system from Germany, and was surprised to find that the academic year not only started earlier, but that there are . . . no term breaks. This is really draining for students and teachers.

Academic staff find that from early September to early July, a variety of very different duties – research, teaching, impact, and managerial tasks (and perhaps

1 See <https://www.vsnunl/2020-werkdruk-ictu.html>

2 For an overview of the development of the student-instructor ratio between 2009 and 2019, see <https://www.vsnunl/studentengroei.html>.

3 During ‘work pressure lunches’ organised at Utrecht University in 2019, the long, packed-full academic year was identified as one of the possible explanations for the heavy work pressure experienced. In its position paper *Structural Changes to Tackle Work Pressure* (May 2021), The Young Academy Leiden recommends a shorter academic year as a measure to counteract the heavy work pressure among academic staff. See https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/yal/position-paper_structural-changes-to-tackle-work-pressure.pdf.

patient care) – all demand their attention concurrently, and that it is often their research that loses out. An instructor-researcher affiliated with the University of Groningen wrote:

A shorter academic year would mean a lot. At present, I have only five weeks out of 52 without teaching obligations. That's far too little to conduct research.

Students also find the academic year long. For example, a student member of the university council at Utrecht University stated that in the final months of the year ‘the entire academic community is totally running out of steam’. There have long been concerns about the mental health of students in Dutch higher education.⁴ It seems likely that the way the academic year is currently structured – offering students at some Dutch universities no real respite between September and July – is one of the factors contributing to that complex problem.

The Dutch academic year is not only *perceived* as being long; compared to neighbouring countries, it also seems to *actually be* long. Compared to neighbouring countries, it starts early and ends late. The academic year at Dutch universities has an average of 30 teaching weeks, not counting examination periods. This is more than is often the case in neighbouring countries. At Ghent University, for example there are 24 teaching weeks and at the University of Saint Andrews 21. It's therefore not surprising that some academic staff in the Netherlands would like to see an academic year that is more in line with that of other European countries:⁵

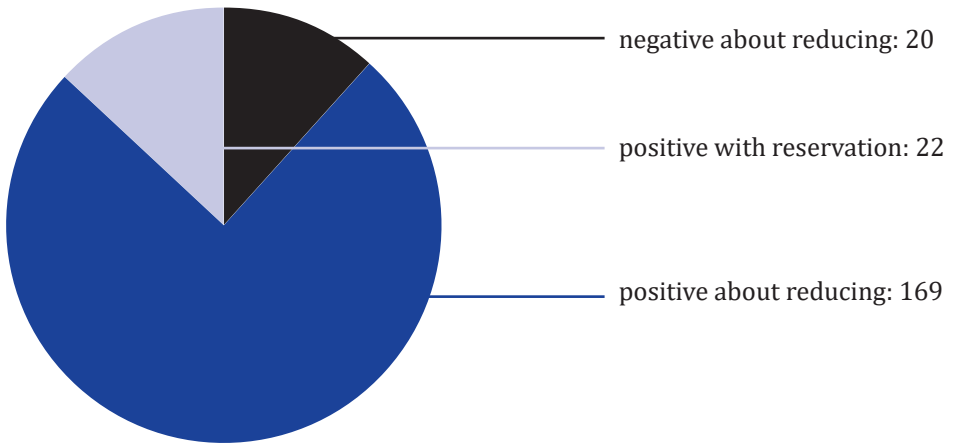
A shorter academic year, for example like in the UK seems to me highly desirable. I worked there as an instructor and researcher myself, so I'm familiar with the implications of that model in actual practice. (Instructor-researcher at a Dutch university)

4 A preliminary survey by the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), the Trimbos Institute, and Amsterdam University Medical Centre found in 2019 that perhaps 25% of Dutch students experience burnout symptoms, which appear to be closely related to performance pressure experienced as being heavy (Schoemaker et al. 2019, *Mentale gezondheid van jongeren: enkele cijfers en ervaringen*, pp. 12, 14). The need identified for more in-depth research on student wellbeing has led to the Student Mental Health and Substance Use Monitor [*Monitor Mentale Gezondheid en Middelengebruik Studenten*], which was launched on 1 March 2021 (<https://www.trimbos.nl/actueel/nieuws/bericht/onderzoek-mentale-gezondheid-en-middelengebruik-studenten-van-start>).

5 In many fields, June and July are also viewed as the international ‘conference season’, a time when Dutch academic staff are often still teaching or administering examinations.

In this report, we explore ways in which Dutch universities could learn from comparable foreign institutions. We proceeded as follows:

In September 2020, The Young Academy published an opinion piece in the *Trouw* newspaper entitled ‘Reduce the work pressure at universities with a shorter academic year’ [*Verlaag de werkdruk op universiteiten met een korter academisch jaar*].⁶ Using social media and other means of communication, academic staff were asked to share their comments on this piece with The Young Academy. That produced some 170 responses. A number of respondents – predominantly from disciplines in medicine and the hard sciences – indicated that they were satisfied with the current academic year. Nevertheless, some 75% of respondents – often basing their comments on work experience in both the Netherlands and elsewhere – advocated a shorter and less packed-full academic year.



With the aid of two student assistants, the academic years of all the Dutch universities were surveyed and compared with those of six foreign universities that are comparable to the Dutch universities as regards performance and breadth. In addition, interviews were conducted (between April and June 2021) with at least one student or instructor affiliated with each of the universities in our international sample so as to more effectively weigh up their experience in actual practice. The results of the comparison between Dutch universities and the universities in the international sample are presented in Section 2 of this report.

⁶ <https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/verlaag-de-werkdruk-op-universiteiten-met-een-korter-academisch-jaar~b28230dc/>

Finally, we spoke with various interested parties at Dutch universities – such as young academics, university administrators, educationalists, and representatives of Dutch student organisations and student representative on university councils – so as to identify the practical consequences of certain measures more effectively.

Based on input from Dutch academic staff, our international sample, and interviews with students and instructors, we present a number of recommendations for a smarter academic year in Section 3 of this report.

2. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

For the purposes of this report, we investigated for each of the Dutch universities:

1. when the academic year starts and finishes;
2. how many teaching weeks there are during the year; and
3. how many test and examination weeks there are during the year.

We then posed those same questions for a number of foreign universities:

- Chalmers Tekniska Högskola (Chalmers University of Technology), Sweden;
- Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Humboldt University of Berlin), Germany;
- Universiteit Gent (Ghent University), Belgium;
- University of Saint Andrews, United Kingdom;
- Università di Bologna (University of Bologna), Italy;
- Sorbonne Université (Sorbonne University), France.

These institutions are comparable to Dutch universities:

- In international rankings they occupy positions that are similar to, or higher than, most Dutch universities. It is likely that these universities offer a quality of teaching and research that is at least comparable to Dutch universities;
- The list was compiled in consultation with members of The Young Academy from various different disciplines;
- They are all involved – or at least were until Brexit in 2020 – in the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS).

A number of points emerge from this comparison.

1. Great variation within the Netherlands

Although all Dutch universities begin their academic year in the first week of September and finish it between mid-June and early July, there are, nevertheless, major differences between them. In the Netherlands, the number of teaching weeks (not including examination periods) ranges from 26 to 35.⁷

Moreover, Dutch universities use very different systems, dividing the academic year into semesters, trimesters, quarters, or even sixths. Finally, there are often significant differences within institutions between faculties, something that would seem to be related to the nature of the various different programmes. A medicine programme, with numerous practicals, requires a different curriculum, and therefore a different schedule, to a history programme.

2. The Dutch academic year has a relatively large number of teaching weeks

Viewed from an international perspective, the academic year in the Netherlands appears to have a large number of teaching weeks. Not including examination periods, that number ranges from 26 to 35, with a mean and median of 30. In our international sample, the number of teaching weeks ranges from 21 to 29, with a mean of 24.5 and a median of 24. Dutch universities thus teach an average of almost one and a half months more per year than the universities in our international sample:

Average number of teaching weeks	
Netherlands	30
International sample	24.5

	First teaching week	Last teaching week
Netherlands	1st week of September	generally 1st week of June
Chalmers (Sweden)	1st week of September	4th week of May
Humboldt (Germany)	3rd week of October	3rd week of July
Bologna (Italy)	4th week of September	4th week of May
Ghent (Belgium)	4th week of September	2nd week of May
Sorbonne (France)	3rd week of September	2nd week of May
St Andrews (UK)	3rd week of September	3rd week of April

⁷ See the appendix for further details.

Total number of teaching weeks		
Netherlands	30	
Chalmers (Sweden)	25	
Humboldt (Germany)	29	
Bologna (Italy)	23	
Ghent (Belgium)	24	
Sorbonne (France)	24	
St Andrews (UK)	21	

THE ECTS AND THE ACADEMIC YEAR

All the Dutch and foreign universities surveyed follow the rules of the ECTS (*European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System*). This means that students at all these universities earn 60 European credit points per year. The study load per credit point ranges within Europe from 25 to 30 hours. In the Netherlands, a student is expected to put in an effort of 28 hours per credit point.

The number of teaching weeks differs both within the Dutch universities and between the Dutch and foreign universities in our international sample. This shows that the ECTS ‘translates’ to a university’s academic year in very different ways.

3. The Dutch academic year has a relatively large number of examination weeks

Dutch universities stand out in our sample because of the number of weeks reserved for examinations. On average, Dutch universities have about five examination periods, and a total of nine weeks per year are reserved for examinations. The foreign universities in the sample have an average of 2.5 examination periods, and on average reserve about five weeks for examinations. Whereas foreign universities have an average of 1.3 resit periods, the average in the Netherlands is more than twice that, namely 3.2. Moreover, at the universities of Ghent, Bologna, Saint Andrews and the Sorbonne, resits take place only once a year, in the summer.

Examinations*		
	<i>Number of periods</i>	<i>Number of weeks</i>
The Netherlands	ranges from 4 to 12; average 5.2	ranges from 4 to 14; average 9
Foreign universities in sample	ranges from 2 to 4; average 2.5	ranges from 4 to 10; average 5.2

* excluding separate resit periods

Number of examination weeks: average	
Netherlands	9
Foreign universities in sample	5.2

Resit periods

On average, Dutch universities have 3.2 separate resit periods of varying length. At the foreign universities the figure is 1.3. In addition, they often occur only at the end of the year and resits are not the norm.

When we add up teaching and testing weeks, it appears that on average we in the Netherlands spend over two months a year more on teaching duties than colleagues at the universities in the international sample.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on our analysis of best practices in the Netherlands and at the foreign universities surveyed. They constitute a starting point for a national discussion and can immediately serve as a toolbox from which universities and faculties, in consultation with faculty and students, can select measures in the short term.

The measures serve three main purposes:

(1) **To counteract the experience of fragmentation** among instructor-researchers at Dutch universities. Because of the long academic year, many instructor-researchers experience structural competition between the four core duties of research, teaching, impact, and managerial duties (and possibly patient care) for almost the entire year. This leads to inefficiency and stress. We advocate following the lead of comparable universities elsewhere in Europe and creating a clearer separation between periods for teaching and for research.

(2) **To create more ‘breathing space’ within the academic year.** We advocate reserving periods for student self-study and reflection, while instructors can then focus on other core duties. We also recommend measures that offer students and instructors genuine ‘breathing space’ at several points during the academic year. This will enhance their resilience and efficiency.

(3) **To do justice to the diversity of educational needs in different fields.** Surveys of Dutch academic staff reveal that the optimum length and structure of the academic year differ greatly between disciplines and fields. The Young Academy advocates flexibility, combined with some basic guidelines that guarantee the possibility of interdisciplinary, interfaculty, and interuniversity cooperation.

Recommendations for a smarter academic year

1. CUSTOMISATION. ADAPT THE ACADEMIC YEAR TO THE NEEDS OF DISCIPLINES.

For whom? Executive Boards and Faculty Boards, in consultation with staff and students

Dutch universities have an exceptionally large number of teaching weeks per year. On average, the Dutch academic year contains 5.5 teaching weeks more than that at the foreign universities in the sample. There are also major differences within the Netherlands: the number of teaching weeks ranges from 26 to 35.

In some disciplines, a relatively large number of teaching weeks may be desirable. This applies, for example, to disciplines involving a lot of practicals or in which students play an active role in conducting scientific research during laboratory internships. A hard-sciences researcher at a Dutch university commented:

For many hard-sciences programmes, [a reduction in the number of teaching weeks] will mean a further reduction in the time available for practical research work.

On the other hand, the large number of teaching weeks we are used to in the Netherlands is experienced as a problem in disciplines that involve little or no laboratory or practical teaching and in which students usually participate less in instructors' research projects. In these disciplines, the exceptionally large number of teaching weeks leads to instructors having too little time exclusively for research.

We therefore recommend that – in close consultation with instructors and students – the number of teaching weeks at Dutch universities be more effectively geared to the nature and teaching methods of the various fields. Methods and types of instruction differ considerably from one discipline to another. There is unlikely to be a standard solution for the academic year at all universities.

STUDENT MOBILITY BETWEEN FACULTIES

In order to continue to enable student mobility between faculties and inter-faculty teaching in the long term, it is desirable that the academic year meet a number of preconditions, such as:

- fixed rest periods, such as the Christmas vacation, should occur at the same time throughout the university;
- blocks and semesters should as far as possible start at the same time.

Even given these preconditions, customisation remains possible and desirable. It remains possible, for example, to have the total number of teaching weeks per block or semester, and the conclusion of a block or semester, depend on what is necessary and desirable within a discipline.

2. REDUCE THE NUMBER OF TEACHING WEEKS ACCORDING TO THE WISHES OF INSTRUCTORS, RESEARCHERS, AND STUDENTS IN THE RELEVANT DISCIPLINES

For whom? Executive Boards and Faculty Boards, in consultation with staff and students

We recommend maintaining the existing academic year in those fields where that is considered desirable. In other fields, it should be substantially reduced to approximately the European average. In our sample, that is about 25 weeks.

This reduction can be achieved in various ways: by starting the academic year later, ending it earlier, or by having longer breaks between semesters. Our international comparison shows that the long, packed-full academic year that we are used to in the Netherlands is not the only way to organise high-quality programmes. A instructor-researcher at Utrecht University put it like this:

I am convinced that a different arrangement of the academic year would deliver equally good educational results and quality for students, but at the same time would give instructor-researchers far more breathing space so as to achieve a better work-life and teaching/administration/research balance.

Based on study and work experience in countries including Germany, the United Kingdom and France, an instructor at Maastricht University wrote that a shorter and smarter academic year '*would make a huge difference and really improve the overall situation not only for staff but also for students.*'

3. REDUCE THE NUMBER OF TESTING WEEKS AND RESIT OPPORTUNITIES ACCORDING TO THE WISHES OF INSTRUCTORS, RESEARCHERS, AND STUDENTS IN THE RELEVANT DISCIPLINES

For whom? Faculty Boards, teaching directors, teaching institutes

On average, Dutch universities reserve about twice as many weeks for testing and examining as the foreign universities in the sample (not including formative testing that takes place during teaching periods). It is likely that this relates closely to both instructors and students feeling that the workload is too high.

On average, Dutch universities also reserve about twice as much time for resits as the comparable foreign universities. Resits at foreign universities are often only once a year. Compared to what is usual in the Netherlands, resits in some of the foreign universities in our sample seem to play a rather marginal role.

We advocate fewer testing moments and fewer weeks dedicated to examinations, so that there is more room for other core duties.⁸ We also advise teaching directors and institutes to investigate how to reduce the role of resits in the academic year and to reduce the number of weeks reserved for them.⁹

8 Some Dutch universities and faculties already have a more limited number of test weeks (for example four weeks per year, one at the end of each block) and can serve as a model for other institutions.

9 There is no consensus regarding the effectiveness of resits. Schmidt et al. 2021 ('Changes in Examination Practices Reduce Procrastination in University Students'. *European Journal of Higher Education*) argue, for example, that resits can lead to procrastination and they therefore advocate the elimination or strict limitation of the number of possible resits. On the other hand, Arnold 2017, argues that '*there is no evidence in favour of a negative procrastination effect arising from increasing students' opportunities to do resits*' ('Resitting or Compensating a Failed Examination: Does it Affect Subsequent Results?' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 42: 1103-17).

4. SAFEGUARD TEACHING-FREE PERIODS

For whom? Faculty Boards, teaching directors, teaching institutes

Interviews with instructors and students show that it is difficult in practice to actually safeguard teaching-free periods. Planning examinations and deadlines just before or just after vacations means that in practice vacations often turn into study weeks, resulting in a virtually uninterrupted academic year with few or no breaks between the end of August and the following July. A student assessor at Twente University of Technology noted that the packed-full academic year leaves little scope for students' own initiative to deepen and broaden their knowledge.

Instructors and researchers indicate that they are often asked to carry out administrative tasks, to supervise resits and theses, or to teach and organise summer schools, even during the teaching-free summer vacation. As a result, research time is also under pressure during that period, and it is often difficult to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

We recommend that teaching directors and teaching institutes schedule tests, resits, and supervision in such a way that periods that are free on paper are actually free in practice. For many researchers, a teaching-free summer period is indispensable for attending conferences and writing papers and research applications. Recruitment activities and summer schools should not put further pressure on the time available for research.

5. DIVERSIFY TEACHING METHODS AND ENCOURAGE AUTONOMY

For whom? Teaching directors, teaching institutes, instructors

We recommend that Dutch universities – in line with the needs of various disciplines – combine a reduction in teaching weeks with diversification of the teaching methods used. By allowing students to study in groups or independently during longer teaching-free periods, their autonomy and independence can be increased and developed, they will experience greater control over their studies, and instructors will at certain times have the opportunity to focus on their other duties. Self-directed and problem-based learning are already in use at several Dutch universities (for example Maastricht University). We recommend making use of the experience gained there in diversifying teaching methods.¹⁰

We can also learn from universities such as St Andrews, which reserve space for moments of reflection within the academic year. For example, each semester at St Andrews includes an *‘independent learning week ... a week dedicated to providing students with an opportunity to consolidate and catch up on their learning, as well as prepare and plan for the rest of the semester’*.

10 Research shows that sufficient time for self-study is a very important factor for study success, while too many classes and lectures can have a negative effect on study duration (Schmidt et al. 2010: ‘Learning More by Being Taught Less: A “Time-For-Self-Study” Theory Explaining Curricular Effects on Graduation Rate and Study Duration’, *Higher Education* 60: 287-300). Self-study in small groups would seem to be particularly effective: Kamp et al. 2012: ‘The Relationship Between Students’ Small Group Activities, Time Spent on Self-Study, and Achievement’. *Higher Education* 64: 385–397.

APPENDIX

The table below gives an overall idea of the number of teaching weeks (not including examination weeks) in the academic years of the Dutch universities. Explanation of the figures:

- Within a particular university, the exact number of teaching weeks may vary somewhat from faculty to faculty and from programme to programme.
- The figures are based on the online institutional calendars and annual timetables of individual faculties.
- For each institution, we looked at (a) the total number of weeks in a semester or block and (b) the number of weeks per block during which faculties generally schedule lectures.

For example: If a university works with four blocks of ten weeks each and the faculties at that university generally use eight weeks per block to schedule lectures and two weeks for examinations, then the table shows 32 teaching weeks for that university.

University	Teaching weeks	Special vacations*
Delft University of Technology	33 weeks	Early-spring vacation: 1 to 5 February
Eindhoven University of Technology	32 weeks	Early-spring (Carnival) vacation: 15 to 19 February
Erasmus University Rotterdam	35 weeks	
Leiden University	26 weeks	
Maastricht University	32 weeks	Early-spring (Carnival) vacation: 15 to 19 February
Radboud University Nijmegen	28 weeks	Early-spring (Carnival) vacation: 15 and 16 February
Tilburg University	27 weeks	Early-spring (Carnival) vacation: 15 and 16 February
University of Amsterdam	30 weeks	May vacation: 3 to 7 May
University of Groningen	28 weeks	
University of Twente	32 weeks	Early-spring vacation: 22 to 26 February
Utrecht University	30 weeks	
VU University Amsterdam	30 weeks	May vacation: 3 to 7 May
Wageningen University & Research	29 weeks	

* This refers to free periods of more than one day, other than the Christmas vacation and national holidays.