

Two sides

The academic year should be shorter

The Young Academy recently proposed that the academic year in the Netherlands should be shortened to reduce teachers' workload. The student union LSVb were sceptical, pointing out the risks of trying to cover the same course material in a shorter time. Researcher and teacher Chiel van Heerwaarden and student Nick Ligthart discuss the matter.

Text Albert Sikkema • Photos Guy Ackermans



Chiel: 'A working group from The Young Academy published its recommendations under the title *A smarter academic year*. I agree that the teachers' workload has got to be reduced, but we are also in favour of good education, and we want the university to invest enough time in that. The point is that we are already doing that in the Netherlands, more than in our neighbouring countries in fact, whereas the standard reached by our students is the same as that of German or French students. In which case, you should ask yourself: how can our education be more effective?'

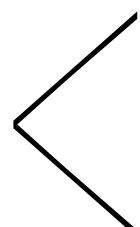
Nick: 'What you should ask is, what are the differences? The Netherlands has an average of 30 teaching weeks, as opposed to 29 in Germany, 24 in Belgium and 21 in England. Who decides on those differences? Within the Netherlands, you see that WUR has 29 teaching weeks, compared with 35 weeks at Erasmus University. That's a bit odd. It makes me

think: watch out in Wageningen that the quality of the education doesn't suffer if you reduce the number of teaching weeks.'

Chiel: 'You can only shorten the academic year if you change the education system, in consultation with students. I had to supervise a resit this year on 4 August. In the middle of the summer holidays. That puts pressure on both teachers and students.'

Nick: 'I'm studying International Land and Water Management. That is largely a science degree, and the students need a lot of contact hours. If my degree programme were to lose many weeks of contact time, I'm afraid the workload would be higher in the remaining weeks. After all, you've got to get those credits from somewhere. The teachers could cover less material and focus more on the

'Introduce deadlines
for theses and ACT
groups'



Nick Ligthart, student of International Land and Water Management and chair of the student union Student Alliance Wageningen in 2019

‘You can only have fewer teaching weeks if you invest in students’ autonomy’

Chiel van Heerwaarden, member of the Young Academy and a researcher at Meteorology and Air Quality

main lines, but then you might leave out material that happens to interest me.’

Chiel: ‘It’s true that you can’t just cover the same material in fewer weeks. I think you can only have fewer teaching weeks if you invest in the autonomy of the students, encouraging them to go in search of knowledge and answers to their questions in the non-teaching weeks.

A university must guide that process, but if the students learn to do this right from the start of their degree programme, they benefit from it throughout their studies.’

Nick: ‘That way, you can reduce the workload for teachers, but you keep up the pressure on students. I think my programme is OK as far as workload is concerned, and we already have a fair amount of independent study. I experience the most pressure in weeks 2 and 3 of a period, when you get a lot of information and don’t yet have a sense of exactly what you’re supposed to do with it all. I’m not sure how you could cut down on the teaching on these courses. We also have regular group work, and we really need time for that. Anyway, I would rather have two or three courses per period.’

Chiel: ‘The problem with short courses is often that teachers are tempted to stuff too much information into the course.

We must resist that fragmentation

in education. We could organize the timetable so that teachers can concentrate their teaching into two of the five education periods, giving you time outside that period for research and other tasks. Personally, I feel pressured if I have to do too many little tasks at the same time and don’t have enough time for them. I would rather be busy with somewhat fewer but bigger tasks that I can focus on.’

Resource: ‘Do you have recommendations as to how the academic year could be shortened without drastic measures?’

Chiel: ‘Fewer exams would help, saving you some time. Dutch universities not only have a lot of exams, but students here are also allowed a lot of resits. Fewer exams would reduce the pressure on both students and teachers, especially around the summer holidays.’

Nick: ‘In Wageningen, there is often no deadline for a thesis, so students sometimes continue working on their thesis for weeks in the summer holidays to get it finished. The same goes for



ACT groups that go on for longer. If you introduce deadlines, there is more chance that students take a break in the summer.’

Chiel: ‘I think Wageningen education has been changing in the direction of more autonomy for students. You get more online instruction now, so that students can prepare for work groups and taught sessions independently. But that only works if students really do it.’

Nick: ‘That kind of autonomy means the university must teach the students how to study.’

Chiel: ‘Students mustn’t be the victims of the teachers’ workload, and we mustn’t solve one problem by creating another; we should make each other stronger. It is a very tricky problem but remember that creativity suffers under stress, and that goes for both teachers and students.’ ■

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