

STATE OF THE PROFESSION

The threat of the triple blow – Dutch higher education under stress

Janosch Prinz*

Abstract

Dutch universities face a triple blow of budget cuts, a reduction of international students connected to a switch to Dutch for some BA degrees, and a vision of the education minister for higher education which seeks to steer universities centrally in service of labour market needs. This triple blow is unfolding against a climate of politicisation of the position of universities in Dutch society. This State of the Profession piece in Politics of the Low Countries will provide the context and explain the details of the three components making up a serious threat to the future of research and education at Dutch universities. It will conclude with a reflection on the potential effects on scholars of politics.

Keywords: Higher education, Austerity, Academic freedom, Internationalization

A new law regulating the influx of foreign students and budget cuts

Universities in the Netherlands have been under an unusual amount of uncertainty, at least since the steadily increasing influx of international students over the past roughly 15 years became politicised. For example, as a key factor in the shortage of available housing in (university) cities and the discussions about the future of the Dutch language (CBS: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2022; VVD 2023; Koehorst, 2023). The influx of international students was a result of the universities' funding model, which tied a substantial portion of funding to student numbers, rewarding above-average growth in student numbers. This funding model incentivised universities to attract international students, given that the Dutch pool of students is

* Janosch Prinz, Maastricht University, j.prinz@maastrichtuniversity.nl

relatively small. These efforts proved successful, due to the high quality of life and education in the Netherlands. In the late 2010s, several Dutch university cities were beginning to face difficulty housing their students (e.g. Beukeboom, 2018). This situation was sometimes viewed as exacerbating both the structural shortage of housing and the pricing out of the housing market of many locals (Koops, 2017; Mouissie & Kraniotis, 2023). Some parties voiced concerns about Dutch public funding being allocated to an increasingly high number of international students (e.g., VVD 2023).

In late summer 2023, the Education Minister of the previous “Rutte IV” government, Robbert Dijkgraaf from the D66 party, submitted a law proposal for public consultation to address this wide-ranging set of concerns by creating new tools for controlling the influx of international students and for maintaining Dutch as an academic language. These tools would have included the ability to set a maximum number of students per degree (English/Dutch tracks) and the shifting of some English language bachelor’s degrees, where English does not “add value”, to Dutch (Rijksoverheid, 2024). This proposal invited universities to determine and coordinate among themselves how to achieve a better balance between Dutch and international students, as well as between English and Dutch, as the main languages of instruction. The language shift to Dutch was deemed one of the few options to indirectly control the influx of international students from the European Economic Area (EEA) in line with European Union rules.

This law proposal brought uncertainty for Dutch universities but was not existentially threatening. After all, the minister was planning to work closely with the higher education institutions to apply this law and had just overseen a substantial increase in university funding through the so-called government agreement with university administrations (“Bestuursakkoord”) to make up for a structural funding shortage in July 2022 (van Hintum, n.d.). This shortage had been estimated at around €800 million per year by consultancy PWC (NL Times, 2021). Due to the fall of the Rutte IV cabinet in 2023, this version of the law did not complete the legislative process.

In the following election in November 2023, Geert Wilders’ Partij voor de Vrijheid/ Party for Freedom (PVV) obtained a plurality of seats and was rewarded with its first active national cabinet participation. This cabinet, further consisting of Nieuw Sociaal Contract/New Social Contract (NSC), the BoerBurgerBeweging/FarmerCitizenMovement (BBB) and the Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie/People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) was led by an independent prime minister, the former director of the Dutch intelligence agency (AIVD), Dick Schoof. The governmental agreement of the four parties featured austerity and cuts in many areas, notably education. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science was taken over by Eppo Bruins on behalf of NSC. Bruins, former director of the Leiden Institute of Physics and more recently chairperson of the advisory body Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI), quickly made clear that he was going to offer

a stricter interpretation of Dijkgraaf's proposal of the "Wet Internationalisering in Balans"/law internationalization in balance (WIB), seeking to make Dutch the main language of academic instruction at BA level again. In an attempt to demonstrate their willingness to adapt to the changing political climate, the Association of Dutch Universities (UNL) responded to these austerity plans with a first set of voluntary, coordinated self-binding measures in 2024. For example, they agreed to switch certain BA degrees from English to Dutch, aiming to enhance the Dutch language skills of foreign students and staff, increase their long-term stay rates, and establish Dutch as the official language for executive-level decision-making (UNL 2024). The cabinet sought to implement their austerity agenda in education through the budget for 2025, which was initially planned at €800 million structurally and later reduced to €497 million annually in a deal to secure a majority for the budget in the Dutch Senate (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal).

The combination of these significant cuts with the WIB and the vision for higher education by Minister Bruins creates a potentially existential threat to at least some Dutch universities. The €497 million of cuts to higher education are made up of €217 million of rollbacks of grants aiming at the reduction of work pressure and to boost the research activity of newly tenured assistant professors (Starters- en Stimuleringsbeurzen), €168 million of cuts that should be realized via reduction of international students, €62 million of cuts to the research budget, and a €50 million cut to the scholarship and research fund. Many universities had made financial commitments based on the agreements with the previous education minister.

The number of foreign BA students started to decline well before the WIB proposal got anywhere near becoming law. And universities needed to start worrying how to pay for their commitments because of the broken agreement with the Ministry of Education, incomes from international student fees started to decrease. Starting from 2022, the growth in foreign BA students already started slowing down. In 2023 and 2024, the drop was 1.9% and 5.9%, respectively.

At the time of writing, June 2025, the cocktail of cuts and lower expected student numbers has led to immediate financial problems at several Dutch universities. There have been announcements of dismissals at Twente (46 dismissals announced), Free University Amsterdam (VU) (42), Open University (56), and the University College Roosevelt in Middelburg (21). Several other universities are currently planning reorganisations in multiple subjects. However, the majority of the impact of the cuts is yet to be felt. The cuts and the prospective reduction in student numbers together could cost thousands of university employees their jobs in the Netherlands.

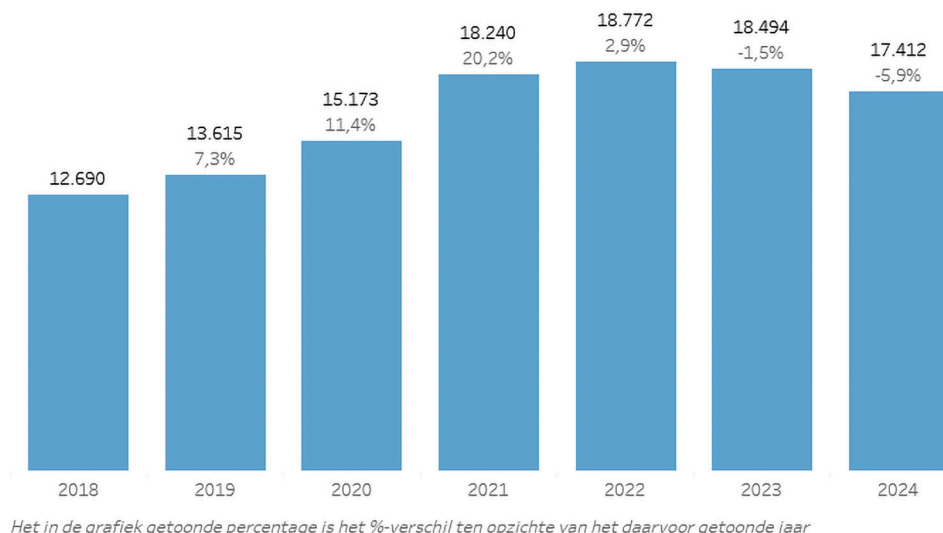


Figure 1 Number of foreign BA students enrolled at Dutch universities

The percentage number shows the difference to the previous year. Source: <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/onderwerpen/onderwijs/instream-bachelorstudenten>.

The Education Minister's vision of central control and prioritisation of labour-market needs

These threats could be further intensified by the vision for higher education that Minister Bruins shared with the Dutch House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal) on 14 March 2025 (Bruins, 2025). Bruins is resolved that we “cannot continue to offer [every degree] everywhere”, not least because of the expected decrease in student numbers due to demographic developments and the return to Dutch-language BA programmes. He further seeks to put university education almost entirely in the service of labour market needs. He threatened that unless universities quickly make a collective agreement that is focused on the provision of education to be measured at the national rather than at the institutional level, he would centrally set which degree shall receive funding from the government at which universities for a certain number of students. This would mean a turn away from the current funding model and a switch to providing funding based on a centrally set desired capacity per degree per institution. Bruins maintains that his policy vision shall lead to less competition, lower work pressure, and more stability in higher education. Thus far, his actions have led to precisely the opposite.

Bruins' vision needs to be read against the background of a negative shift in Dutch social and political discourse about universities. To give an example, Bruins claims

that universities are not currently a role model for society, e.g. with regard to how to engage in discussion of controversial **topic** (Science Guide, 2025a). The director of the Dutch Science Organization (NWO), Marcel Levi, when writing a column in personal capacity, has questioned the academic and societal value of certain sub-disciplines (Levi, 2025). Universities are increasingly viewed as politicised and, in the context of the protests against the Israeli war in Gaza and the review of academic ties to institutions in conflict zones, linked to antisemitism (Science Guide, 2025). This has led to the formation of a task force on antisemitism (Rijksoverheid, 2025a). Another example of this politicisation: The cabinet recently demanded that universities ask “market-conforming prices” for public-facing events and activities such as university sports facilities. This is an indication that this cabinet seeks to undermine the public role of universities (DUB, 2025). There are further measures in preparation by the cabinet geared to exercise stronger control over Dutch universities, including a law opposed by UNL that would require universities to screen students and employees working on “sensitive topics” (Rijksoverheid, 2025b; Sharma, 2025).

So let us call the above the threat of a triple blow – consisting of 1) budget cuts, 2) the new law on internationalisation (WIB) and 3) Bruins’ new vision for higher education – that Dutch universities are facing. If all these punches land, Dutch universities will shrink and become less autonomous in the years to come. Especially young and international staff will be adversely affected.

At the time of writing, the level of uncertainty hanging over Dutch universities is still very high. The budget cuts have been passed, but a lawsuit is being prepared against these cuts. Tilburg University and Radboud University Nijmegen are taking the Minister to court over the one-sided cancellation of the “Bestuursakkoord” (UNL, 2025a).

The new language law (WIB) is still in process. Bruins is working on a revised version in response to an amendment passed in December 2024. On 16 April 2025, UNL offered a second set of voluntary coordinated self-binding measures (UNL, 2025b). The goal is to limit the damage that is being caused by the uncertainty before the WIB takes effect and by carrying out a test for existing English BAs to determine whether there is sufficient reason to offer them in a language other than Dutch. This test (“Toets Anderstalig Onderwijs”/ Test for education in another language) would not only leave universities in limbo for a long time, but it would also require universities to engage in work-intensive administrative procedures without creating any benefit for Dutch society.

This second set of self-binding measures proposed by UNL aims to reduce the number of international students by reverting to Dutch as the language of instruction for BA degrees in psychology in the Western economic heartland of the Netherlands (“Randstad”), provided that the TAO for existing BAs will be scrapped. It also contains an agreement to set maximum student numbers for some degrees taught

in English in the fields of economics and business. In the border regions of the Netherlands, universities shall continue to offer psychology both in English and Dutch, which reflects an amendment passed by the Tweede Kamer in December 2024. It is unclear whether Bruins will accept this proposal made by the universities. On 27 May 2025, the House of Representatives forced Bruins' hand by passing a motion that demands that he does not apply the TAO for existing BA programmes. The Minister has yet to respond how he will accommodate this motion in the text of the WIB.

In response to the climate of uncertainty – Bruins himself acknowledges that he has damaged the trust of the universities in the ministry (Eerste Kamer der Staten General, 2025) – Dutch universities have experienced a wave of protests and strikes not seen since the 1980s. A demonstration of 25000 staff and students in The Hague on 25 November 2024 was followed by a relay strike in spring 2025, which involved more than 28000 people at 14 universities. Staff and students worked with their Executive Boards to protest against government policy. This alliance might come under strain if the voluntary coordinated self-binding proposal by UNL continues to offer to switch English-language psychology degree programmes to Dutch. Many university staff members worry about a slippery slope here. Once UNL agrees to give up English-language BA programmes in Psychology in some universities, what would they do if the minister demands more language switches in other disciplines? Given that the Schoof cabinet has already one-sidedly cancelled the “Bestuursakkoord” of 2022, many staff and students fear that agreements with the government are no longer trustworthy and hence should not be made. Grassroots organisers WOinActie (Higher Education in Action) and the labour unions are currently seeking to broaden the protest to include primary and secondary education and other parts of the public sector that are being targeted by the austerity measures of the Schoof cabinet.

Looking ahead

The fall of the Schoof cabinet on June 3, 2025, is likely to increase the uncertainties mentioned above. The WIB could be declared “controversial” by the Dutch House of Representatives and in that case would not be discussed until a new government has been formed. Given that the elections are scheduled for the end of October 2025, this could take more than another year. At the same time, the fall of the cabinet also provides the opportunity to prevent the triple blow or at least to reduce its impact. For one, the fall of the cabinet puts the Minister's timeline for implementing his vision for higher education on hold. Furthermore, the additional cuts announced in the spring budget in April 2025, which would particularly affect secondary schools and also result in a maximum of €60 million in extra cuts per year in higher education, are unlikely to be implemented after all. Furthermore, UNL and the grassroots

organisers now have an opening to convince the Dutch parties and voters to accord a higher priority to (higher) education and research.

Still, the threat of the triple blow already affects us, as scholars of politics in the Netherlands.

First, our job security and employment conditions are deteriorating. Some institutions have informally indicated that they are looking to reduce their staff by approximately 10% in the coming years, if the cuts are fully implemented and current student enrolment trends continue. Apart from the many individuals whose lives would be severely affected, there would likely be an increased workload for most of us, coming at the expense of our ability to do high-quality research and teaching.

Second, even if mass dismissals of staff with permanent contracts can be avoided, institutions have started not renewing temporary contracts and not replacing retiring staff. These measures disproportionately affect junior scholars in the PhD or post-doctoral phase. There is thus an acute risk of a lost generation of junior scholars and a brain drain away from the Netherlands. To avoid this, very hard choices between securing the future of the discipline in the Netherlands and accepting personally adverse consequences might be on the horizon.

Third, our future ability to determine our teaching and research based on pedagogical and scholarly considerations is becoming increasingly uncertain. We need to devise strategies for defending our freedom to continue researching and teaching topics and perspectives that are not held in high esteem by the current government.

Fourth, this threat environment brings the relationship between Dutch universities and the Dutch government into focus. Dutch universities need to develop a new position that combines a demand for qualified autonomy in terms of teaching and research with a strong focus on communicating their societal benefits to a broad range of audiences. Scholars of politics should play a pivotal role in developing this position, in collaboration with other scholars from the humanities and social sciences. They have the expertise on how past transitions to authoritarian regimes have featured the undermining of the authority of scholarship and the negation of the qualified autonomy of higher education, and on how higher education institutions can win sufficient support from the public.

References

- Beukeboom, S. (2018, September 6). Studenten-tentenkamp Groningen niet populair, 'daar slapen totaal niet fijn'. *NOS Nieuws*. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2249257-studenten-tentenkamp-groningen-niet-populair-daar-slapen-totaal-niet-fijn>.
- Bruins, E. E. O. (2025). Beleidsbrief vervolgonderwijs, onderzoek en wetenschap. Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2025Z04806&did=2025D11112.

- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. (2022, March 28). 40 percent international first-year students at Dutch universities. <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2022/11/40-percent-international-first-year-students-at-dutch-universities>.
- DUB. (2025, April 17). Prijzen moeten marktconform. Kabinet maakt einde aan goedkoop sporten voor studenten en personeel. <https://dub.uu.nl/nl/nieuws/kabinet-maakt-einde-aan-goedkoop-sporten-voor-studenten-en-personeel>.
- Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2025). Verslag van de vergadering van 1 april 2025 (2024/2025 nr. 24). <https://www.senaat.eu/9370000/1/j9vvkfvj6b325az/vmm6wl0h3av2>.
- Koehorst, P. (2023, November 6). Pieter Omtzigt onvermurwbaar: 'Nederlands voertaal op universiteit'. *UToday*. <https://www.utoday.nl/news/73465/omtzigt-onvermurwbaar-nederlands-voertaal-op-universiteit>.
- Koops, R. (2017, August 26). Ivens: Universiteiten dragen bij aan kamernood. *Het Parool*. <https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/ivens-universiteiten-dragen-bij-aan-kamernood-b69f0e1d/>.
- Levi, M. (2025, March 22). Zo'n sabbatical of gap year na de studie noemden we dat vroeger niet gewoon een vakantie. *Het Parool*. <https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/zo-n-sabbatical-of-gap-year-na-de-studie-noemden-we-dat-vroeger-niet-gewoon-een-vakantie-bd4b83b5/>.
- Mouissie, S., & Kraniotis, L. (2023, November 11). Schreeuwend tekort aan woningen en hoge huizenprijzen: hoe is het zo gekomen? *NOS Nieuws*. <https://nos.nl/collectie/13960/artikel/2497415-schreeuwend-tekort-aan-woningen-en-hoge-huizenprijzen-hoe-is-het-zo-gekomen>.
- NL Times. (2021, March 5). Higher education needs €1.1-billion boost to meet Dutch standards. <https://nltimes.nl/2021/03/05/higher-education-needs-eu11-billion-boost-meet-dutch-standards>.
- Rijksoverheid. (2024, May 13). Sturen op gebalanceerde internationalisering hogescholen en universiteiten. <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/05/13/aiming-for-a-balanced-internationalisation-of-universities-and-universities-of-applied-sciences>.
- Rijksoverheid. (2025a, March 7). Taskforce antisemitismebestrijding van start. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2025/03/07/taskforce-antisemitismebestrijding-van-start>.
- Rijksoverheid. (2025b, April 7). Screening for researchers wishing to handle sensitive knowledge. <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2025/04/07/screening-for-researchers-wising-to-handle-sensitive-knowledge>.
- Science Guide. (2025a, April 16). Universiteiten op dit moment geen voorbeeld voor de samenleving, zegt Eppo Bruins. <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2025/04/universiteiten-op-dit-moment-geen-voorbeeld-voor-de-samenleving-zegt-epo-bruins/>.
- Science Guide. (2025b, March 28). Na Trump wil men ook in de Tweede Kamer universiteiten korten vanwege antisemitisme. <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2025/03/na-trump-wil-men-ook-in-de-tweede-kamer-universiteiten-korten-vanwege-antisemitisme/>.
- Sharma, Y. (2025, April 17). Academics say draft screening law could deter foreign talent. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250417132055569>.
- Universiteiten van Nederland. (2024, February 8). Universities take steps to manage influx of international students. <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en/current/news/universities-take-steps-to-manage-influx-of-international-students>.
- Universiteiten van Nederland. (2025a, April 10). Education cuts passed – universities go to court. <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en/current/news/education-cuts-passed-universities-go-to-court>.
- Universiteiten van Nederland. (2025b, April 15). Universities rebalance internationalisation. <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/en/current/news/universities-rebalance-internationalisation>.
- van Hintum, M. (n.d.). Smart allocation of a billion euros calls for sharp choices. *NWO*. <https://www.nwo.nl/en/smart-allocation-billion-euros-calls-sharp-choices>.
- VVD. (2023, April 25). Niet voor alle buitenlandse studenten plek. <https://www.vvd.nl/nieuws/niet-voor-alle-buitenlandse-studenten-plek/>.