

# SUMMARY

## 1. Context, assignment and approach

The number of study programmes in Dutch higher education in which instruction is provided in English, either wholly or partially, has increased steadily in recent years. The trend is strongest at research universities, but it is also evident at universities of applied sciences. The ascendancy of English as a language of instruction in Dutch higher education has given rise to much debate. Some believe it is a largely beneficial trend, for example with a view to internationalisation and quality of education. Others are worried about the quality of knowledge transfer or about detrimental consequences for culture and society.

This debate has led the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science to ask the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences to conduct a foresight study into language choice and language policy in Dutch higher education in the broad sense, focusing specifically on the choice between English and Dutch. The Minister has requested solid data and arguments that can form the basis for a rational discussion of the value of instruction in Dutch and English and the conditions needed to guarantee the quality of higher education. The Minister has also asked the Academy to consider the effects of the increasing use of English in higher education on professional practice, on the progress of students into and within higher education, and on Dutch culture and society.

Because instruction in Dutch study programmes is typically provided in English and/or in Dutch, and in view of the Minister's request, the committee appointed to prepare the foresight study ('committee') has concentrated on these two languages. The foresight study is based on the available literature and reports on language choice, language policy and their effects, on reports by the institutions concerning their language

policy, and on interviews with representatives of the relevant organisations, university lecturers and students.

## **2. Arguments in favour of instruction in Dutch and/or English in higher education**

The language of instruction chosen for a particular study programme is closely related to the nature and subject matter of that programme. However, the committee observes that three other categories of arguments are also put forward to justify language choice in higher education:

1. *Arguments related to internationalisation and quality of education:* Institutions of higher education operate in a highly international environment in which students are prepared to become world citizens and in which international student and staff exchanges are common. Such international exchanges can promote diversity and, consequently, benefit the quality of higher education. Many institutions assume that it is necessary to provide instruction in English to reap the benefits of internationalisation.
2. *Arguments related to the labour market and profession:* Where students go to work after graduation also determines which language of instruction is used in a particular study programme. Study programmes that prepare students for the Dutch labour market are more likely to have Dutch as the language of instruction, whereas those that prepare students for an international labour market usually use English.
3. *Business-related arguments:* Institutions of higher education compete with one another and seek the best methods to attract and retain good students and staff. If a large number of departments specialising in a particular field already offer English-language programmes, there is a considerable incentive for the remaining departments in that field to follow suit. In addition, choosing to provide English-language instruction may depend on the institution's wish to retain certain study programmes and/or to maintain or increase enrolment; that may be the case, for example, for certain programmes of higher professional education in border regions, or for study programmes that attract only small numbers of students. Finally, the Dutch funding system and internationalisation goals also influence the language policy of institutions of higher education.

## **3. Impact of language choice and language policy on education and quality of education**

The committee understands the significance and relevance of the above considerations and arguments, although it also observes that these arguments are not always based on factual evidence. In addition, it has found that actual language choices and

language policies vary considerably. The choices made at universities of applied sciences may differ from those made at universities, for example because the instruction offered by the former is geared more towards professional practice; similarly, the factors at play in Bachelor's degree programmes may differ from those in Master's degree programmes. The choice of language further may be closely related to the nature and subject matter of the study programme. The committee observes that institutions do not always make enough allowance for such diversity in their language policy. Moreover, in many cases there is a need for a broader, more meticulous language policy than is now the case. More specifically, based on the data that it has obtained, the foresight committee notes the following:

### **Language choice and quality of education**

One of the advantages of instruction in English, according to the institutions, is that it allows foreign students to enter the Dutch education system, thereby promoting an 'international classroom'. The presence of foreign students and international staff can have a positive effect on the quality of the study programme, the institutions claim. Generally speaking, instruction in English is also considered of 'better quality' than instruction in Dutch. Indeed, according to the committee, instruction in English need not be provided at the expense of educational quality, and in fact may help improve that quality. However, the committee points out two crucial conditions for preserving or improving the quality of education:

1. To offer an effective English-language study programme, institutions must invest in the subject-specific and pedagogical aspects associated with their language choice. This means that they must do more than merely require lecturers and students to have a certain minimum command of the language and offer language courses. Resolving to offer a study programme, course or even just a specific subject in English requires judicious guidance and decision-making. In addition, to achieve the desired level of quality, both lecturers and students must have a good command of the language of instruction. Lecturers must not only have the requisite proficiency in the language but also the pedagogical skills needed to teach effectively in a foreign language. For instance, they should be able to give examples referencing to current events or matters of relevance to students, to allow for students' language proficiency when marking papers or exams, and to train students' language skills.
2. To take full advantage of the enriching presence of foreign students and staff, both students and staff must master an adequate number of intercultural skills. In addition, lecturers must cultivate skills that allow them to provide effective instruction in a diverse and international environment.

## **Labour market diversity**

One frequent argument used to justify language choice is the need to prepare students for the labour market. The assumption is that the labour market is growing increasingly international, which is then considered to justify the decision to provide a certain study programme in English. In reality, however, the labour market for university graduates is extremely varied. Sometimes graduates do end up working in a highly international setting, but for many the context is predominantly national or mixed. For many study programmes, then, English is by no means the obvious choice as the language of instruction (whether or not as the sole language). In addition, while a good passive command of English is sufficient in some professional settings, in other environments graduates need to be able to express themselves fluently and with great precision both in English and Dutch. The committee observes that universities do not always make enough allowance for this diversity and the associated need for differentiation, either in their language choice or in their language proficiency policy.

## **Dutch language proficiency**

Many institutions of higher education assume that students enrolled in English-language study programmes do not need to work on their Dutch language proficiency. However, in many cases sound professional preparation really does dictate a need for training in Dutch language proficiency. It is also important for foreign graduates and their integration into Dutch society to have a satisfactory command of Dutch, both in their subject area and informally. They are more likely to remain in the Netherlands that way and make a positive contribution to Dutch society and the Dutch economy.

## **Language of communication and employee representation**

Internationalisation and the growing number of English-language study programmes have consequences for the language of communication at institutions of higher education. Specifically, difficult discussions are being waged about the language of communication at board meetings, with regard to employee representation, and in everyday work situations. In the case of employee representation, choosing English as the language of communication may exclude groups that are less proficient in this language; in many cases, this is the support and administrative staff. On the other hand, choosing Dutch makes participation difficult for foreign students and staff. The committee advises institutions to seek options that allow all groups to participate as much as possible. One interesting approach is the 'parallel languages' solution, in which those attending a meeting speak in either Dutch or English, depending on their own abilities and wishes. They can assume that the other attendees understand them and are capable of comprehending texts written in the other language. Another option

is to ensure that all groups have a good enough command of the language of communication to participate actively in policymaking and decision-making, for example by offering them intensive language training.

## **4. Social and cultural impact of language choice and language policy**

The committee has been unable to find hard evidence concerning the impact of the increase in English-language study programmes on students' progress from secondary to tertiary education and within tertiary education as such (for example from Bachelor's to Master's degree programmes). The only thing that is clear is that bilingual instruction at secondary level provides significantly better preparation for English-language instruction in higher education than a monolingual approach. The committee recommends further study of this issue.

By and large, English-language instruction appears to have a negative impact on students with a migration background and on students from a disadvantaged background. Once again, however, little is known about causality and the effects of certain language policy choices. Further study is therefore advisable.

The growing extent to which instruction is provided in English in higher education means that Dutch is losing traction as the language of academia. In the committee's view, there is a risk that this will drive a wedge between academia and Dutch society in general, and make it more difficult to communicate the results of scientific and scholarly research to the public. The committee would like to see further research exploring the extent to which the rise in English-language instruction in higher education is influencing the use of Dutch in the society and culture of the Netherlands.

## **5. Points to consider**

In line with the above comments, the committee has identified various points for institutions of higher education to consider when making language choices and developing a language policy. They are:

- The language of instruction must be a conscious choice, and not one that is simply made on autopilot. Differentiation is essential. For every department, language (policy) choices should be made that allow for the specific objectives of the study programme in question and the relevance of the following arguments: international mobility, subject matter and quality of education, progress of students, academic training and preparation for the (diverse) labour market (including work in academia). Regardless of the department or study programme, there must

always be good, subject-specific, evidence-based reasons for providing instruction in a particular language and for choosing a certain modality to achieve the relevant objectives (instruction entirely in English, instruction entirely in Dutch, or more differentiated; relevant scenarios are given in Chapter 6 of this foresight report).

- Although the institution may set the course for the overall language policy, the language of instruction is best decided at department/programme level. It then becomes possible to allow for the nature of the study programme, the educational resources to be used, the specific profession for which students are being trained, and so on. As far as relevant in the light of the institutional arrangements, language choices ought to be made in consultation with the central board of the institution.
- In choosing to provide instruction in English, institutions must be well aware of the associated costs and benefits, opportunities and risks, and advantages and disadvantages. These include both 'hard' costs and benefits (e.g. rise in enrolment, but also the costs involved in language training or translation of the teaching and examination regulations) and 'softer' costs and benefits (such as an international and diverse environment and access to the international labour market, but also the fact that the use of Dutch teaching materials is then excluded and that discussions may arise concerning the language of governance and employee participation).
- The decision to use a particular language of instruction should be firmly anchored in a supportive language and internationalisation policy. That policy should focus on:
  - the pedagogical aspects of providing instruction in a foreign language;
  - creating the conditions for a properly functioning 'international classroom' by investing specifically in the integration of foreign students and their contacts with Dutch students, in the intercultural skills of both students and lecturers, and in the pedagogical competencies of the lecturers;
  - seeing that the language used in everyday work situations, in the boardroom and in employee representation is such that all those involved can participate effectively;
  - the various language skills that the study programme requires of students and lecturers and the best way for them to acquire those skills (in both English and Dutch);
  - the way in which lecturers assess and provide feedback on examinations, essays and other documents written in a language that is not their native tongue;
  - pedagogical evaluation and peer review of the subject matter and quality of education (within the department or institution), without this leading to further bureaucratisation or merely checking items off a list.

Chapter 6 makes several more specific recommendations based on these general points of consideration.