

LANGUAGES: A WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT

Interview with departing Language Centre director Charles van Leeuwen

Maastricht University, 5 June 2007 – Charles van Leeuwen is leaving his post after eight years as director of the Language Centre. Today is his last working day in the old canon's house of the Church of Saint Servatius, the distinguished home of the institute.



What did you set out to do as director?

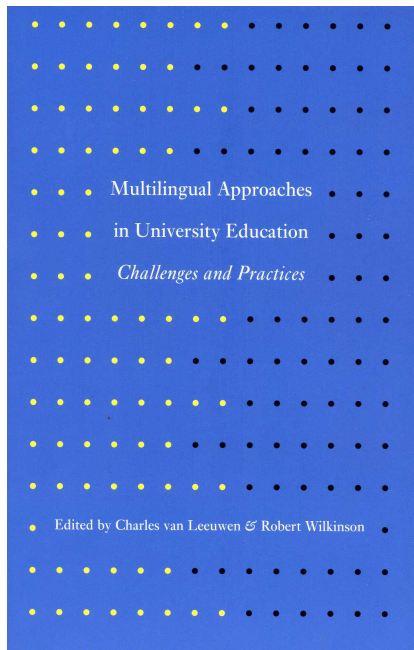
Language training is a fine mission in a university as internationally oriented as UM. You cannot graduate in languages at UM, but you can take many subsidiary language courses during the course of your studies. Almost all students do so. Our system allows students to study in a language other than their native language: English as well as Dutch. Not many universities provide you with that opportunity. It is wonderful to see so many hesitant students progress to having several working languages at the end of their study. Some of them stay with Dutch and English, others have no problem with three languages, because they come from a different country or have spent some time abroad. I have even met students who are fluent in four or five languages; something I get very enthusiastic about as a linguist. Looking back on the past eight years, I think we have done a lot to support students and employees of the university. We have raised the profile of language training and laid the foundation for good-quality education, built

a competent teaching team, put bilingualism on the management agenda and given Dutch the place it deserves. After much opposition we finally managed to implement English certification for staff and students and professionalize support in the area of translation and editing services. However, in my professional opinion, I can say there is still a lot more to be done if you want to be a European university and establish yourself in the field of languages too. Isn't that what we want? Now that I am leaving, however, I realise that what we have achieved is very fragile. It makes you think.

What do you think of UM's bilingualism?

Many students underestimate the difficulty of studying in a different language. They think it's easy until they have to write their first dissertation; then they panic and hopefully knuckle down to some real work, and make an important discovery: perfect bilingualism does not exist. At that point they can start to develop their skills and change their attitude. It is all about knowing what you are good at and what you need to work at, finding the right tools (good books, particular websites, a study archive you have built yourself) and when to seek help from others. I sometimes see application letters written by students that are full of mistakes. Those students obviously have no idea what their strengths and weaknesses are and do not feel the need to have such important letters read by someone else. There are students who do have that insight and are very professional in their use of language. That is an academic skill that is required in almost any profession. Multilingualism is a learning process and a realization process. It is a long process, but very rewarding. It makes you professionally more versatile, gives you increased cultural awareness, and broadens your academic

and social horizons. It is wonderful to be able to provide your students with such opportunities; that is what makes Maastricht special.



Does the university live up to bilingualism?

The university has had an official policy of bilingualism since 1996, which is still being developed. The topic is very much in the minds of students. Many students are attracted by it, or mention it at the end of their studies as one of the most formative aspects. It is in the minds of the staff as well. Multilingualism is important on all levels: from general and technical support to policy development, from porters and switchboard operators to communications officers and lawyers, from student assistants to professors. The fact that the unions have made resources available this year for language training, whereas the Executive Board is cutting back, is very significant. I believe that the importance of academic multilingualism has not yet been taken on board at academic staff and management level. Lecturers often underestimate the effort and extra time involved in foreign language education. They prefer putting their energy into research. Management does not always realise that the extra effort and time must be rewarded and that it requires, and will continue to require, specific support. If you have a multilingual education system, you must invest in it, otherwise you will continue to muddle along and achieve only average results. This is not just a question of organizing one-off crash courses and exams, but of creating and maintaining an infrastructure. Our university is very ambitious and has so many different objectives: internationalization, small-scale Problem-Based Learning, being in the European elite, talent scholarships and attracting

top research. All these objectives have their price. You cannot give extra funds to everything and you cannot excel in everything either. In my opinion, multilingualism and language training are in danger of falling victim to this. Other objectives take precedence over languages. As a Language Centre you are at the hub and on the side-line of the educational process at the same time. Language training is often the target of condescending remarks like: It is not very academic, is it? Can't students do it themselves? Shouldn't they have learned that at secondary school? That shouldn't be very expensive, should it?

You are leaving the Language Centre at a difficult time.

Unfortunately so. When I announced to a small group of people in 2006 that I would be starting a new job in the New Year, everything was OK. The Language Centre was running well and could only just keep up with the work. Then came one negative announcement after another: the Executive Board plan to phase out subsidies; the Language Centre had to vacate its premises and sublet its classrooms from faculties; the position of director would no longer be filled to economize on a management layer. In other words, the Language Centre was stripped within a few months: No more subsidies, no more building and no more manager... I stayed on a few months longer to prepare a reorganization plan together with our controller: the key thought behind the plan was consolidation. Looking back I ask myself whether it was time well spent, because consolidation does not appear to be part of the management approach. Perhaps it only postponed things for six months, and it depends on your perspective whether this is a good thing or not.



So you are leaving the Language Centre at a bad time?

Some colleagues think so and I think so myself to some extent. It is not easy leaving after eight years – it was a period of formation and expansion – and

handing over your brainchild under trying circumstances is difficult. Some people think of it as desertion, as if you are abandoning ship at the first sign of a problem. Others think of it as weakness, as if you can't take it any longer and are leaving the mess for someone else to clean up. But that is not the way I see it. Had the University Board chosen continuity, then we would have had continuity, with a fine Language Centre, excellent staff, first-rate education and a satisfactory price/quality ratio. But the Board decided otherwise and we must respect that, although I'm afraid that the consequences will be less favourable for us.

Hadn't the Language Centre become too expensive?

Approximately 20% of the budget – 500.000 euros – consisted of 'subsidies' if you would like to call them that. By European standards that is not a lot, especially if you think that we get 5000 students a year. A comparative survey at the beginning of the year showed that our hourly cost price is considerably lower than that of other Dutch university language centres. Of course a facility like a Language Centre costs money; it can never be entirely self-supporting. But what it costs now – 30 euros per student per year – is still only a fraction of what other facilities cost that are taken for granted, like sports, housing, communication, the University Library, ICT, etc. But this Executive Board believes that it should be possible without subsidies. 'Subsidy' has become a dirty word, whereas almost all university language centres in Europe are subsidized facilities and that is not an issue.

Don't languages play an important part in UM's Strategic Programme?

They do, and it is not logical to cut back on language training. A good Language Centre is important for recruitment. The first contact many international students make with the university is through languages. Take the 150 prospective students who follow intensive summer courses in Dutch every year and then register for Psychology or Health Sciences, or the 100 students who follow intensive courses in English before registering for a course. If you refer those students to other universities, you will lose most of them, and that is 10% of your intake. The internationalization policy will also be more difficult to pursue if students can no longer prepare for exchange programmes. Currently over 400 students follow a Spanish course every year, 300 a French course, 200 an Italian course and 100 a German course; those are serious numbers. Other languages are doing well too: the Chinese, Swedish, Russian and Portuguese courses are almost always fully booked. The Language Centre is an essential facility for

students. Students must not let the Board forget this, through representation, through the Education Committee and, failing that, by the marks they give in the student surveys.



Can the Language Centre be more commercial?

Of course. I have always given priority to the work at the university; there is already so much to do there. We also get requests from external institutes and companies to provide courses. Sometimes we have to pass over an opportunity, because we are already running faculty programmes and simply don't have the capacity. That is a policy choice. Some university programmes bring in less, but that is our core task. Of course you can shift the emphasis, but then you have to take a few things into account: the opportunities in our region are not unlimited. We compete against Hogeschool Zuyd, which has its own language facilities. Cross-border competition, where education is even more subsidized, is strong too. And if you want to work in Eindhoven or Venlo, travel takes up so much time that it is hardly cost-effective. The margins are very small. The question is therefore: How much external growth is still possible? When I started working at the Language Centre in 1999, our turnover was one million guilders. Approximately 80% of that came from faculty and university programmes. Now our turnover is 2.2 million euros; that is four times as much! Faculties only account for half of the turnover; the other half is business-related. That does include student course fees. Perhaps it is possible to squeeze in more, but I think we have pretty much reached our limit, at least if you want to continue carrying out your core tasks as well.

The Language Centre is going to be part of the University Library. What do you think to that?

We developed and proposed that plan ourselves in 2003, with the librarian at the time, John Gilbert. We saw some advantages to a large cluster that would combine academic information supply with the training of academic skills, offering books, magazines, a learning environment, study places, courses on research skills, as well as writing and language courses. In addition, there were all kinds of opportunities at operational management level: the University Library would have been able to provide the ICT support which the Language Centre was missing. Achieving synergy in the area of housing and professionalizing administration also seemed possible. The plan was not approved by the Executive Board, for reasons that were never very clear to me. The scenario has many opportunities I would have liked to have developed four years ago. In my opinion, the fact that we left it so long is a missed opportunity.

If you look back on eight years in management, were there any other missed opportunities?

I would have liked to have developed a large-scale digital learning environment to support language training. We did carry out the necessary projects and develop various programs, but it was all very small-scale. We came up against various limitations: the limited options in Blackboard; its administration was more difficult than we had anticipated, not all lecturers were convinced of its didactic added value, and finding the necessary funds for investments in our income and expenditure account proved to be very difficult. Moreover, such a learning environment requires years of development – I underestimated that. We did not achieve what I had in mind in this area. The fact that we did not succeed in getting our vision on language training permanently accepted at management level is a missed opportunity as well. For a long time the institute's policy dovetailed almost seamlessly with the Language Centre's policy. But that changed when the management changed, which is why the Language Centre became managerially isolated. I see the fact that I failed to properly anticipate the managerial turnaround as a personal shortcoming. That is one of the reasons why I want to make way for a new director.



What will you be doing in your new job?

I will be starting two new jobs. I will be Study Secretary for The Brothers CMM in Tilburg for four days a week, where I will be working on publications in the area of spirituality, doing research into the history and future of religious life, teaching courses, taking part in retreats and supporting management. It is an interesting and dynamic job with lots of challenges. I will be working for the Netherlands as well as for countries with young religious provinces, such as Indonesia, Brazil and Kenya. Of course, I will also need to do work in Italy and France. In that way I can continue using my languages. In addition, I will continue to work one day a week for Maastricht University as lecturer in European Studies, doing tutorials and supervising dissertations. I am very happy with that. I am a teacher and a European in heart and soul. I can combine that with the job. I have become very attached to UM after all these years. We have an excellent educational system and great students from so many countries and so many different languages. I really hope it stays that way!