

Multilingual universities in Europe: Models and realities¹

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1. Introduction

It seems to have become fashionable in Europe to create multilingual universities, either by introducing new languages of instruction in existing institutions, or by founding new institutions with a more systematic plurilingual design. As there are many different ways of shaping a multilingual educational environment, it is not surprising that terminological confusion arises: indeed, 'multilingual university' may indicate very different realities. This article – a report of the workshop *Developing plurilingualism in University education: achievable, realistic and affordable?* (Maastricht University, ICHLE - October 2003) – aims to create some order and lists a number of criteria which may help to distinguish between different models of multilingualism in higher education.

2. The monolingual universities in a national context

At the end of the 20th century, most European Universities reflected in their use of language the nation state in which they were founded or in which they had developed for centuries. We may describe this as a context where the national language (here labelled L1) is simultaneously the mother tongue of the students, the language of instruction and the language of university administration, the language of the environment and the language of the labour market, as listed in figure 1.

1. students' mother tongue	L1
2. language of instruction	L1
3. language of administration	L1
4. language of environment	L1
5. language of the labour market	L1

Figure 1: European Universities in a national context, 1990

The context permits limited variation. Some programmes are allowed to change the language of instruction (2=L1, L2...), such as language studies themselves, but the system itself is not affected by this incidental change. In addition, some differences arise students' native tongues (1= L1, L2...), but these remain limited cases and they are not reflected at an institutional level. Some of the students might find a job in another labour market and will use other professional languages (5= L1, L2...), but their numbers are insignificant and the students are not prepared to for such usage during their academic studies.

¹ Charles van Leeuwen, 'Multilingual Universities in Europe: models and realities' in: Robert Wilkinson (ed.), *Integrating Content and Language: Meeting the challenge of a Multilingual Higher Education* (Maastricht 2004) pp. 576-584

It is a system which serves well the needs of the national state and is suitable in an economy where the international mobility of students and staff is limited.

We believe these five parameters can be used to construct a model to explain the languages used in multilingual universities. Other parameters might be of interest, such as the language of the secondary education, the native tongue of the staff and the language of research: they are not, however, taken into account separately in the model, in order to keep it simple. The language of research is only one: English. The language of the secondary education can be considered, in most cases, the native language of the students. And the native language(s) of staff and of students will be, on the long term, the same, as staff and students are recruited from the same language groups. In this respect, monolingual universities are based on the following four assumptions:

- the language of instruction at universities = the language of instruction in secondary education = native language of the students
- the language of instruction = native language of university staff
- the language of instruction = language of the labour market
- the language of instruction = one of the major languages of research output

Changes in these last two categories force the national universities to review their monolingual approach.

3. Partial introduction of English-medium programmes in national universities

Not only the changed political reality and the globalized economy, but also changes in the academic world itself, have gradually impelled European universities to abandon the monolingual approach and try to accord some place to other languages in their institutional design. As far as the academy itself is concerned, the increasingly dominant role of English in research makes it necessary to add English as a language of instruction, and offer at least to those students with a future in research a proper linguistic preparation. The higher demand for international mobility among students and staff is another incentive to adapt the educational programme at least in part and open it to other target groups, supported by a more heterogeneous staff. For some universities it is a matter of principle: does it still make sense to stick to a monolingual university system while students are supposed to master more languages to perform well in research and on an increasingly international labour market and find their way in multicultural communities? Other universities believe it is necessary, in order to continue to attract sufficient student numbers in an increasingly market-oriented academic world, where international competition might be the decisive element to realize minimum numbers for survival or marginal success. The partial

introduction in Dutch universities, about 2000, of English as the language of instruction has consequences for our model as shown in figure 2.

1. students' mother tongue	NL	L2	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	NL			ENG
3. language of administration	NL			
4. language of environment	NL			
5. language of the labour market	NL	ENG	L3	L4

Figure 2: Dutch Universities with two instruction languages, ca. 2000

Major changes are visible in three fields: there are two languages of instruction, in order to recruit students with different language backgrounds and to serve different labour markets. Although some administrative tasks have to be dealt with in English, the major administrative language remains Dutch. The same with the language of the environment, which is preponderantly Dutch, notwithstanding some small and isolated international student communities where other languages are spoken (not necessarily English).

It is useful to distinguish some more categories in the fields where the major changes occur, to clarify the functioning of these universities and explain the difficulties they meet. The international student population includes at least five distinct groups with different motivations, attitudes and expectations: Dutch students, immigrant students (first and second generation), European students, overseas students and exchange students (2-9 months). The profile of universities can vary markedly according to the percentage of these distinct groups. The programmes the groups follow may differ in the use of English and Dutch as instruction language. There is wide range from undergraduate and master's programmes taught entirely in Dutch to some undergraduate and many master's programmes taught entirely in English. In addition, universities tend to offer programmes in Dutch with some English elements, or courses offered in both languages at the same time or with a major and a minor language. As soon as there is more than one language of instruction, it is useful to determine when and in what scope these languages are employed, creating another model incorporating dimensions of quantity and time. Figure 3 points out different strategies in Dutch universities regarding to the introduction of English as language of instruction.

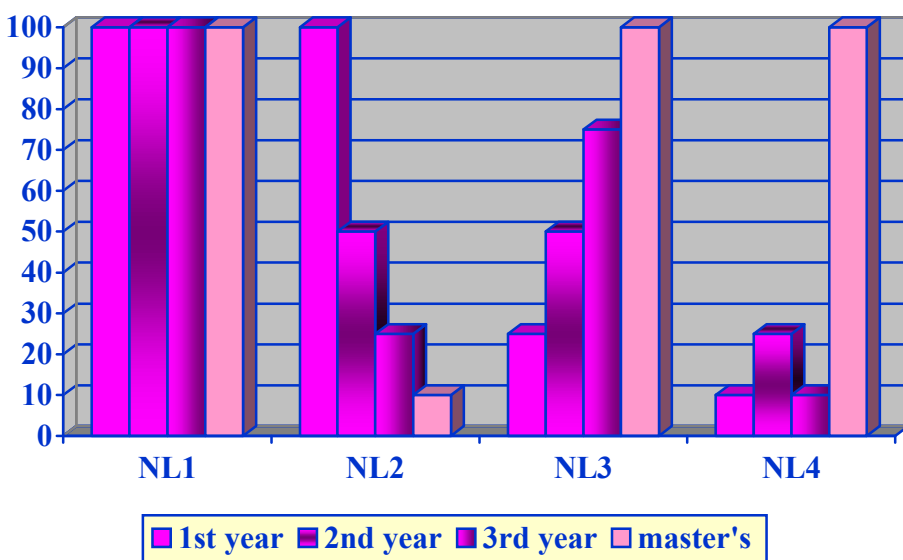


Figure 3: Different scenarios in timing and percentage of English courses at Dutch universities

Some programmes (NL1) are offered at both undergraduate and master's level entirely in English, especially in the fields of economics and business studies. A few programmes (NL2) start entirely in English in order to allow foreign students to enroll, but expect those students to learn Dutch. They introduce gradually more Dutch elements in the curriculum in order to prepare for a Dutch master's programme – a formula which is still rare in the Netherlands but common in Germany. There are not so many Dutch universities working the other way round, with an increasing number of English courses in the context of a Dutch programme, in order to prepare gradually for the English master's (NL3). It is a formula which is popular in Southern and Central Europe, but limited to those universities where student recruitment is mainly national. Most Dutch universities currently prepare an English master's programme with a Dutch undergraduate programme, enriched perhaps by a few English courses and skills training programmes at undergraduate level (NL4).

This leads to another distinction among multilingual universities. Do they aim to develop a multilingual competence in all students or a considerable part of the student population, or do they allow students to follow a monolingual programme in the context of a multilingual university environment? Do they have parallel programmes in each language, which aim at separate student groups, or do they integrate those programmes and expect their students to follow at least part of their studies in both languages? If the latter is the case, how do they prepare a shift in language of instruction? This is a problem all universities with different languages at undergraduate and master's level have to face, and there is no easy solution. Further difficulties in national universities with more than one instructional language are illustrated by other conflicting elements in the model:

- language of instruction at university > < language of instruction at secondary school
- language of instruction > < native language of staff members
- language of instruction > < administrative language

The first two incongruencies affect the quality of the teaching, the third one may cause problems in registration and exam regulations, communication, public relations and logistics. To resolve these problems, universities have two solutions. They may limit the use of English as instructional language to a few, well-defined contexts and maintain the national language in its dominant role, as is the situation in Flanders. Alternatively, they may try to go further and follow a more radical multilingual policy, which involves a transformation of the university administration as well, and demands a multilingual competence of both academic and administrative staff and the students (figures 4 and 5). Creating this international academy in a small border city like Maastricht, the city will evolve more environmental languages, one alongside the others.

1. students' mother tongue	L1	L2	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
3. language of administration	L1			L2
4. language of environment	L1			
5. language of the labour market	L1	L2	L3	L4

Figure 4: The bilingual University of Maastricht, 2004

1. students' mother tongue	L1	L2	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
3. language of administration	L1			L2
4. language of environment	L1	L2	L3	L4
5. language of the labour market	L1	L2	L3	L4

Figure 5: The bilingual University of Maastricht, 2020?

4. Tradition of multilingualism at European universities

European universities can find examples of multilingual education in their own tradition: as is well known, for many centuries Latin was the main language of instruction. University administration (which tends to follow the language of instruction) and research were largely in Latin as well. Student mobility was a widespread phenomenon: the old institutions had heterogeneous student populations and many students went back (with or without degrees) to their home countries (figure 6).

1. students' mother tongue	NL	L2	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	LATIN			
3. language of administration	LATIN	NL		
4. language of environment	NL			
5. language of the labour market	NL	L2	L3	L4

Figure 6: Universities in the Netherlands, 1425-1795

The main difference between the model in figure 6 and that in figure 2 is that there is only one language of instruction. It might be the situation again as soon as universities tend to adopt English as their only language of instruction, and abolish most courses in the national language: a choice which at the moment is not allowed by Dutch law, but promoted by a number of university policy makers and feared by others. If this concept of multilingual university were to prevail, the University of Maastricht would have a different outlook than sketched in figure 5, and would rather look as illustrated in figure 7:

1. students' mother tongue	NL	EN	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	ENGLISH			
3. language of administration	ENGLISH	NL		
4. language of environment	NL	ENG		
5. language of the labour market	NL	EN	L3	L4

Figure 7: The mono-English University of Maastricht, 2020?

This situation would be similar to that of many other monolingual English universities elsewhere in the world, e.g. in Turkey, Nigeria and Malaysia, where there is prominent tradition of English-medium university education.

5. Universities in a multilingual national context

European multilingual universities do not necessarily have to look to a tradition of centuries ago. More recent examples are the universities on the language borders, which provide education in the context of a multilingual nation-state. The most famous European university with a bilingual profile is probably Fribourg in Switzerland, which offers French and German programmes to a student populations with at least three languages (figure 8).

Both languages of education have more or less equal cultural and political importance and this enables a rare symmetrical model (but completely symmetrical multilingualism never exists, not even in the most idealistically strict universities). Students with a different linguistic background, e.g. Italians, cannot study in their own language and have to make a choice between French or German or a combi-

nation. Most students follow programmes in only one of the two languages. A minority combines them ($2 = L1 + L2$), with approximately 20% of the students aiming at a bilingual degree which certifies studies in both languages. Some studies with smaller numbers of students are offered partially in one and partially in the other language ($2=L1, L2$). Although some staff members teach in both languages, most work in only one. Both languages have equal weight in the university's administration and, with some differences, in the surrounding environment.

1. students' mother tongue	FR	GER	IT
2. language of instruction	FR	GER	
3. language of administration	FR	GER	
4. language of environment	FR	GER	
5. language of the labour market	FR	GER	IT

Figure 8: The bilingual University of Fribourg, 1880-1980

The importance of finding an appropriate role for English as well disturbed this nice symmetrical design. The university had to find a solution for the use of three languages in its curriculum, complicating the situation. Apart from programmes in French, in German and bilingual programmes in French and German, the university now had three more possibilities: French and English, German and English and, especially in the natural sciences and at master's level where student numbers are small, a combination of the three. Figure 9 reflects how this appears in our model.

1. students' mother tongue	L1	L2	L3	L4
2. language of instruction	1 2 3 1	2 3 1 2 3 1		
3. language of administration	L1	L2		
4. language of environment	L1	L2		
5. language of the labour market	L1	L2	L3	L4

Figure 9: Fribourg University 2000-2010, with three languages of instruction

This model reflects the reality as well of some other trilingual universities in Europe, such as Bolzano in Northern Italy (Italian, German, English), Luxemburg (German, French, English), Frankfurt an der Oder (German, Polish, English) and Helsinki (Finnish, Swedish and English). These are the places where the ideal of the European Community, to create a European elite with at least three professional languages, begins to become visible. But at the moment these trilingual universities only have a reason to exist in cities on the language border or in a region with a strongly emancipated minority language. It is interesting to compare their situation to the development of the university of Louvain, where for a

number of reasons, such as political tensions and demographical considerations (too many students for such a small city) the different language communities of the university have again been separated into two distinct universities, spread over two different cities (figure 10).

1. student's mother tongue	FR	NL	FR	NL	FR	NL
2. language of instruction	FR		FR	NL	FR	NL
3. language of administration	FR		FR	NL	FR	NL
4. environmental language	NL	FR	NL	FR	FR	NL
5. language labour market	FR	NL	FR	NL	FR	NL
	before 1930		UCL + KUL, 1965		UCL 1980	
	KUL 1980					

Figure 10, University of Louvain, its development from a multilingual university to two monolingual universities

At the moment however, one faculty in the French University of Louvain (UCL) aims to develop a programme where, apart from French, also English and Dutch will be employed as instruction language, whereas the Flemish University (KUL) introduces for a limited number of graduate programmes a small English and / or French component. The result might be a on the long term the partial realisation of figure 9, in both universities. It is an illustration of university's ongoing development and the fact that even the best balanced models will never be able to arrest change.

Conclusion

This short inventory of multilingual universities in Europe makes clear that these universities are similar because they employ more than one language, but very different in a number of other aspects. We are able to describe their different realities in a model distinguishing between the native language(s) of the students, the language(s) of instruction, the language(s) of the university's administration, the environmental language(s) and the language(s) of the labour market. This model explains as well the problems these universities may face, as difficulties often arise along language fold lines or where symmetry between the use of languages is lacking. Finally this inventory shows that multilingual universities not only have to face many didactic and organisational challenges, but as well have to manage carefully their own process of change. In fact multilingual universities are subject to continuous change. Even small and subtle innovations in course design, in student or staff recruitment and in the languages of communication and administration may have big consequences for the equilibrium inside their model of multilingualism.