

# Utrecht University language policy



**Advice to the Executive Board**

# Introduction

In the Netherlands, language in higher education is regulated by Article 7.2 of the Law of Higher Education and Scientific Research (WHW):

## Artikel 7.2 taal

Het onderwijs wordt gegeven en de examens worden afgenomen in het Nederlands. In afwijking van de eerste volzin kan een andere taal worden gebezigd:

- a. wanneer het een opleiding met betrekking tot die taal betreft,
- b. wanneer het onderwijs betreft dat in het kader van een gastcollege door een anderstalige docent gegeven wordt, of
- c. indien de specifieke aard, de inrichting of de kwaliteit van het onderwijs dan wel de herkomst van de studenten daartoe noodzaakt, overeenkomstig een door het instellingsbestuur vastgestelde gedragscode.

Our current *gedragscode taal* (Code of conduct languages) dates back to 2004 and no longer meets the language challenges of the day. In 2016 the university offers 6 Bachelor's programmes and 90 Master's programmes in English, and those numbers will grow in the coming years. As the University strives to be an inclusive community, it is important that the use of language supports the inclusiveness of UU as a diverse academic community. It therefore aims to develop a new policy that ensures consistently high standards of language use, in Dutch as well as in English.

## National context

The public debate about language use of higher education institutions has been ongoing for some time. In 2011, the *Onderwijsraad* (Education Council) published their advice on the 'Judicial use of English in Higher Education' in which they call for higher education institutions to develop a vision and strategy when it comes to internationalisation, and a clear policy on language use that follows from that. The political context has changed over the years. Before the turn of the century Dutch was still very much considered the main language of instruction, whereas today the importance of English is a given. Discussions are more about the (perceived) quality of teaching in English and related concern about the level of Dutch that graduates would have.

Several universities have reviewed their language policy since then. There is a definite trend towards more and more university education taking place in English, and the policies reflect this. Maastricht University teaches almost exclusively in English, and has adopted an 'English, unless...' language policy. The University of Twente plans to teach all its Bachelor's programmes in English in 2018. The University of Groningen's language policy emphasises the use of both Dutch and English, and refers to the importance of other languages and intercultural skills as well. All have developed a support programme for students, support staff, and teachers.

## European context

The Netherlands is clearly not the only country where the use of English as a foreign language in higher education is under discussion. Both in Denmark and Belgium (Flanders) the increasing use of English has led to measures to protect the local language(s), and in Belgium the government has set limits for the percentages of programmes that can be taught in English: 18% for Bachelor's, 50% for Master's. In Denmark the government decided to promote Danish language and culture in general, and while there are no specific requirements for higher education institutions, most Danish universities have followed suit. The University of Copenhagen, for example, has developed a 'Centre for Parallel Language Use', offering both Danish and English courses for students and staff.

In 2012, the EU published 'Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-economic Outcomes', in which it sets out the importance of language competences for employability, competitiveness and mobility. Their recommendation is a 'dual' language policy: the local language, and English as a medium of instruction.

## English and Dutch

Even though it is frequently under discussion, the importance of English in higher education is widely understood: not only is it the *lingua franca* of science, but the globalising world and open Dutch economy increasingly require students to be fluent in a second and even third language. The international position of Dutch universities is dependent on publications in English, but also on attracting talent from beyond the Dutch borders. And last but not least, a common language allows students to interact and learn with peers from around the world, fostering cultural knowledge and understanding that seems more relevant than ever.

At the same time the University's roots are in the Netherlands, and society functions in Dutch as the formal national language. Yet, in a multicultural society like the Netherlands, Dutch is not necessarily the first language spoken. The launch of the 'Make it in the Netherlands' programme by the Dutch government in 2013 shows the importance of the Dutch language for international students wishing to stay in the Netherlands after their studies. For Dutch graduates, for international students and staff coming to this county, and for the dissemination and impact of our research, a good command of the Dutch language is beneficial.

## Committee

### **Prof.dr. Rob van der Vaart – chair**

Former Dean University College Utrecht, vice-rector of Education

### **Prof.dr. Peter Coopmans**

Professor of language acquisition

### **Dr. Annemieke Meijer**

Coordinator UCU writing center, English-medium instruction, CLIL

### **Johanna Bozuwa**

International Master's student with experience in bilingual education

### **Femke van der Geest**

Policy advisor education & internationalisation

The committee met on several occasions to discuss literature and research material, as well as case studies at other institutions. They organised a Breakfast session on June 7, where discussions took place among more than 70 participants: teachers, support staff, and students. A combination of these activities has led to the present advice to the Executive Board.

## Recommendation to the Executive Board

### 1. Degree programmes at UU

Clarity about the language(s) in which programmes are offered is essential. The committee suggest three options:

- a. In Dutch, as registered in the CROHO. This has three sub-divisions:
  - i. In Dutch only. This means that students should be able to earn the degree by doing all required assessment in Dutch. Students may choose optional courses taught and assessed in English, but it should always be possible to earn the degree without such courses assessed in English.
  - ii. In Dutch and English. This means that required courses and assessment may be in Dutch and/or English, e.g. in programmes that start in Dutch but gradually switch to English to prepare for English Master's programmes. The infrastructure around the programme may be (partly) in Dutch.
  - iii. In Dutch and another language. Language programmes at BA and MA level may employ other languages; in those cases the rules should be equivalent to those stated above for Dutch and English (ii).

- b. In English. This requires that all aspects of education and the surrounding infrastructure, such as communication, relevant web applications, quality assurance including the work of curriculum committees (*opleidingscommissie*), and services, be in English.

## 2. Individual courses within degree programmes

We recommend that clear communication on the language(s) used in individual courses be required:

- a. Courses offered in programmes officially listed as English (see 1.b) use English only, in class as well as in assessment, without exceptions.
- b. For courses in English (fully or partially) within programmes in Dutch (1.a.i) or in Dutch and English (1.a.ii), it is always specified in advance which language(s) will be used in classroom settings and assessment. It is not allowed to deviate in actual practice from what was announced in the course catalogue. After all, the choice for English is not just to accommodate non-Dutch speakers, but also to allow students to practice and improve their English language skills.

## 3. Language proficiency levels

The committee suggests the following minimum language proficiency requirements for students, teachers and support staff<sup>1</sup>:

- a. For all Bachelor's programmes, a minimum language proficiency at B2 level is required for students (as determined by Dutch law).
- b. For Master's programmes, a minimum language proficiency at C1 level should in future<sup>2</sup> be required of all students. Language-specific programmes in the domains of literature, linguistics or language teaching may require B2 instead.
- c. For teachers the minimum level of proficiency is level C1. This requirement should become part of the Basic Teaching Qualification (*BKO*).
- d. For support staff it is equally important to be able to do their work in an international environment. This will require different levels of proficiency, depending on the job and the environment.

## 4. Undergraduate and graduate education

In one respect undergraduate programmes deserve special attention in an overall UU language policy. Many graduate programmes, at UU as well as elsewhere in the country, are now being offered in English. Dutch undergraduate students should be prepared for such master's programmes. This requires that many BA and BSc programmes offer students the possibility to develop academic communication skills in both Dutch and English. The committee therefore recommends that BA and BSc programmes consider moving from solely Dutch to Dutch and English and have instruments in place that help students reach the C1 level in both languages by the time they graduate. This can be implemented in many different ways, and various examples already exist in different faculties.

## 5. Academic communication skills

The committee proposes that the required level of language skills in Dutch and English for graduates are ensured by following these recommendations:

- a. It is recommended that the intended learning outcomes of all degree programmes include strong academic communication skills, in both speaking and in writing. These skills should

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for the Common European Framework of References levels for language use

<sup>2</sup> Current practice for English is that a high B2/low C1 level is required of all international students, but Dutch students are exempted on the basis of having completed a (Dutch) bachelor programme at a Dutch University. Their level does not always meet the requirement, and this exemption is not according to the principles of selection set out for Graduate Education. Once bachelor programmes have adapted their learning outcomes to include a C1 level in English (see 4), this should be the entry requirement for all master's students.

consist of an interdependent mix of knowledge and understanding of a subject, reasoning skills, and language proficiency (sometimes referred to as 'disciplinary literacy').

- b. All students should receive feedback about (the development of) their academic communication skills, including the language component. This should be the case for Dutch and/or English, depending on the language of the programme or course.
- c. Feedback about a student's language skills (as part of their academic communication skills) may be provided in many ways. Programmes may identify language-intensive courses with a special focus on such feedback. They may use the expertise of specialised teachers, use teaching assistants who are native speakers, or rely on the teachers of the course if they have the skills to do so and this does not lead to an inappropriate workload.

In all cases, feedback about communication skills in courses is diagnostic rather than remedial. Students who need extra help should be referred to support facilities (such as the Skills Lab).

## 6. International classroom

The committee wishes to underline that the focus should not be limited to language only: programmes and courses with students of different nationalities and from different backgrounds are a setting that requires much more than just a language policy. The international classroom offers rich opportunities for the development of intercultural dialogue and international understanding, for benefiting from diversity (also in learning styles), and for realising a global outlook. Teachers should be aware of these opportunities and use the diversity of the classroom to enrich learning outcomes. The pedagogy associated with an international classroom, including intercultural skills, should become part of the Basic Teacher Qualification (*BKO*).

## 7. Facilities & community

The committee would like to emphasise the importance of facilities for the testing and development of language proficiency of faculty, staff and students in both Dutch and English. In particular:

- a. UU should offer Dutch language training for free to non-Dutch faculty members with tenure track or tenure. It should be required that they learn Dutch, at an agreed level of proficiency, within a set number of years.
- b. UU should offer Dutch language training at an attractive rate to non-Dutch UU students at all levels (Bachelor, Master, PhD).
- c. UU should offer English language testing and training for free to all staff and faculty members who need or want to improve their English language proficiency.
- d. UU should offer English language support in the same way that it offers Dutch language support through the Skills lab.
- e. UU should ensure that all communication is in the language(s) relevant to the community.

## Next steps

The following steps are proposed:

1. Discuss the proposal with the Deans of the Faculties.
2. Rewrite Code of Conduct for Language Use (*Gedragcode taal*)  
The new code of conduct should reflect the values expressed in the recommendations.
3. Develop a proposal for implementation  
The Executive Board appoints a small project committee with experts from HR, O&O and Faculty to develop a plan (or several scenarios) for implementation.

## Implementation

Moving from recommendations towards practice will take time, effort and money. Several other Dutch universities are in a similar process, and have shared some of their information:

University	Project	Skills	Time period	Central budget
RUG	International classroom	language & intercultural skills	8 years	
Leiden	Taalbeleid	Language	4 years	€ 685.000
EUR	Taalbeleid	Language	5 years	Testing: € 80.000 Courses: 500-600€ per course per person

Utrecht can make use of the experiences of the EUR and Leiden in particular in developing its own implementation plan. The project committee will develop several scenario's in cooperation with the faculties, and under supervision of the *Stuurgroep Internationaal*. The implementation plan will include the principles for implementation, several scenarios, the financial consequences, and a practical guideline on how to proceed. The committee should include:

- A project leader (HR)
- A faculty (HR) representative
- Policy advisor internationalisation O&O
- COLUU expert on English as a Medium of Instruction
- A member of the academic staff
- A student

## Appendix 1 – Common European Framework of Reference levels

<b>Proficient User</b>	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
<b>Independent User</b>	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
<b>Basic User</b>	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly is prepared to help.