



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

THE INTERNATIONAL PARADOX

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Introduction

No doubt you have been following the debate on internationalisation and language policy. All sorts of claims are being made. For example:

- 'Soon every programme will be taught in English.'
- 'The reason universities are doing this is to make as much money as possible.'
- 'Dutch students and their interests are being pushed aside.'
- 'Command of the Dutch language is at stake, as are access to education and access to the housing market.'

Quotes like these *are* defining the debate.

Today I want to look beyond these issues and take a closer look at the internationalisation of universities and what it actually means.

And not from the standpoint of what it means *for the university*, but the opposite: what is our role in a society that is becoming more internationalised, and what kind of education policy and internationalisation policy are appropriate in this context?

The world is flat

Obviously, internationalisation is nothing new. Ever since universities came into being, academic debate has not been confined to national borders and researchers have sought each other out.

To put this in a historical perspective: the founder of the University of Amsterdam, Gerardus Vossius, belonged to an international network of 17th century scientists that included the likes of Rene Descartes and Constantijn Huygens. A genuine correspondence network, which has been visualised by Dirk van Miert at Utrecht University. He has illustrated the interactivity and frequency of contacts between scholars.

What struck me most about this visual representation is that it is practically identical to that of a contemporary Twitter network. Only the difference is that the time intervals back then were in years as opposed to fractions of seconds today. 'The world is flat', indeed.

The discourse, too, has been international for years.

Just look at our lustrum series *Challenging Society*. One of the themes was privacy. Helen Nissenbaum illustrated how data files are simply generated and used, unhindered by nation state borders.

This same series includes reflection and debate on neurobiological possibilities and what that means in terms of an international ethics of human enhancement.

These are international issues where ethics, politics, law, health, well-being, trade and technology overlap. They shape the world we live in. Which is why, whether we like it or not, our daily environment doesn't end at our national borders, and this is something that started a long time ago. And this is true whether we work in Gouda or Zoetermeer.

But, I'm sure I don't have to convince you that Amsterdam, as a multicultural and international city, can claim a prominent position and so can our university.

Why an international classroom?

I would like to go back to the question of why internationalisation is important. I just gave the answer: it is the world for which we must prepare our students. It is the future world that our graduates will shape.

A dynamic world without borders, that needs to be built and understood

Our job here is to teach our students to learn to take responsibility in that context, to give meaning.

I would like to quote Dilly Fong, Professor of Higher Education Development. This is what she says in her publication *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*:

'Education is not primarily about individual gain and personal benefit, but about developing a sense of collective engagement and responsibility. Education is not a set of technicalities, it embodies an intellectual and ethical position.'

In a world without borders that means: local *and* international. The French political scientist and essayist Dominique Moisi argues that it is all the more important to learn about the emotions of other cultures because he says, and I quote: 'The emotional borders of the world have become just as important as the geographic ones'.

Both quotes indicate that we must reflect on a 'cultural renaissance' in education. A new look at knowledge and context.

Students must absorb new influences and ideas, new opportunities, and collectively discover the responsibilities that this brings.

That happens in an international classroom comprising students of different nationalities, students with a variety of backgrounds and cultures

The appropriate balance

With new developments it is tempting to strive for growth. The more internationalisation, the better. But are we really serving our purpose this way?

What we spend too little time thinking about is the optimal balance, on three different levels:

- the balance between Dutch and international students
- the balance between English and Dutch in the wider university environment
- the balance between programmes in Dutch and in English

So, where are we now?

The Netherlands is attracting a growing number of international students, over 80,000 by now, an increase of more than 8% compared to the previous year. And here, at the UvA, in the past decade the number of foreign students has risen by a factor of 4. Nowadays, a total of 15% of the UvA student body is international. For first-year students, however, this figure is closer to 25%, mainly due to several new English-taught Bachelor's programmes. You can imagine that this growth – especially when it is sudden – produces considerable challenges as well as some pressing questions.

How many students can we accept; what is the ideal mix; at what point are Dutch students crowded out?

And the most important and most obvious question: are there limits to growth, and do we want to set them?

The need for an internationalising policy

I could leave it at this, for example by saying that these are very important questions we should all think about. Raising a whole bunch of questions, without coming up with any answers ...

That would be a pity.

I have explained what the university means in our internationalising and changing society. I will now set out which goals I believe do and do not belong here.

And allow me to make one thing clear from the start: growth is not the goal, large numbers are not the goal, money is not the goal.

So what *are* our goals?

To attract the right talent for the programme. To offer the right programmes. To improve quality of our education. To provide a stimulating student experience, as well as an international perspective. And finally, as the UvA, to be firmly rooted in society and to help shape it: and that goes for both Dutch society and international society.

Again, we are very well placed to do that based on our research. As I said even in the time of Vossius international exchange was vitally important. Nowadays, in addition, the focus of a lot of our research programs is international in its own right. To give a few examples: in regional and language studies, in the hub economy, in artificial intelligence and astronomy, in international law, in our related Asser institute and in many of our research priority areas such as Access Europe and Global Health.

Bilingualism

And yet to achieve these goals, there are limits to growth and we need to strike the right balances.

To start with, a balance between programs in Dutch and English. Actually we want both.

First, Dutch programmes with a touch of English. Active use of English is important for all students. This also makes it possible for international students to come to Amsterdam for shorter periods of time. We also encourage these exchanges for our own students. For example through the Global Exchange Ambassador Programme: a peer-to-peer programme that pairs up exchange students from different countries.

And second, we want English-taught programmes with specific learning objectives that also pay attention to Dutch language skills for the Dutch-speaking students. In this context, the qualitative frameworks must be properly defined: what should the students gain from it? This is a curriculum that includes international cognitive learning outcomes, cultural skills, student experience and language proficiency.

For disciplines with large student numbers, offering both an English and a Dutch version is an enrichment. For disciplines with smaller numbers of students, the international character might lead to a wider inflow.

The choice for option 1 or option 2 – English-taught with specific learning objectives or Dutch-taught with a touch of English – must be made carefully, with all engaged, but within a set framework. It is not merely a switch from Dutch to English; And we also want to take into consideration the value of Dutch as a language of education in the total number of our degree programmes.

Moreover, the UvA has a social responsibility: a university cannot become alienated from its native surroundings. That has consequences. It means that it is important for a language to continue to evolve in the new research domains. Teaching in Dutch plays a key role here.

This is how the new terminology develops and new words emerge. These new findings then become accessible to a wider audience.

At the UvA, we want to foster the value of bilingualism.

Inflow

The second balance concerns the ratio of Dutch students to international students. In my opinion, it should be possible to control the inflow of international students.

An example: Can you imagine a lecture hall in the future consisting for 80% of students from Germany, or from China? This is not in line with what we have in mind for an international classroom. It would not contribute to our goals.

As a Rector I cannot give specific inflow percentages for each programme. That can depend on context. We want to have mixed groups from different countries and the Netherlands. That means we must have a way to steer this process accordingly – something that is still difficult to achieve at the moment.

Our minister of Education, Culture and Science says that she wants to make an effort to increase the appeal to foreign students while maintaining accessibility for Dutch students. I am happy about that. But it is precisely this accessibility and internationalisation that may be at odds with one another. This requires therefore our full attention.

In total, 70% of international students at the UvA are from the European Union (EEA). Admission is based on evaluation of their credentials and language level. They can enrol automatically. Currently, institutions are lacking the tools to steer the inflow into regular Bachelor's programmes accordingly. That is why it would be advisable to add a criterion that allows the composition of the international classroom in terms of diversity and international background to be weighted as a factor.

The wider university environment

Internationalisation also presents us with the task of offering access for people to improve their language skills and intercultural skills, for students and for everyone involved in teaching and supporting programmes. And when we look at it from the international students' perspective: a good and unambiguous admissions process in which it is clear whether the programme fits their existing knowledge and ambitions, a good intake and initial introduction, and detailed information about student housing. Student housing is a continuous concern. We are urging the city of Amsterdam to provide more student housing and of course we will continue to contribute to help find solutions.

Conclusion

I now come to my conclusion.

I opened my argument with four quotes. Let's memorise them together:

- 'Soon every programme will be taught in English.'
- 'The reason universities are doing this is to make as much money as possible.'
- 'Dutch students and their interests are being pushed aside.'
- 'Command of the Dutch language is at stake, as are access to education and access to the housing market.'

You now know the answer to these four questions: It is an emphatic 'No'. I have highlighted the importance of an internationalisation policy for the UvA that focuses on improving the quality of education from the perspective of society, and I have indicated the role of the minister and of the city of Amsterdam hereby.

In the past 20 minutes, I have made an attempt to describe how the world our graduates move in is an international playing field. A playing field that is, moreover, characterised by tremendous interaction between disciplines and knowledge domains.

As a university, it will be our role to make sure we provide the knowledge and skills our graduates need to make a difference in this national and simultaneously international playing field. So that they know which cultural differences exist, but most of all know how we can complement each other so we can play a valuable role in our future society.

We want to have the details of the UvA's International Classroom concept finalised this year. By 2020, we want a significant number of the UvA programmes to have included international and intercultural aspects in their curriculum and incorporated them into their teaching methods, assessments and learning outcomes.

In the process, we must recognise and set the limits of growth in internationalisation, to ensure that we can go on providing quality and added value.

We must adapt our policy to this, set requirements for the learning objectives of Dutch as well as of English programmes, and adapt the curricula accordingly in a balanced portfolio of Dutch and English programs.

All of this so we can continue to mould ourselves, over the next decade, into a bilingual, internationally oriented and culturally integrated university.

Thank you.

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