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Broadening the scope of QA

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Michèle P. Wera (Belgium, 1958) is senior policy advisor at NVAO in The Hague since 2004. She deals primarily with (initial) accreditation procedures of study programmes and with reviews of universities in the Netherlands and abroad. She was secretary to NVAO's Executive Board until 2014. She has a special interest in the assessment of medical programmes. At present, she is coordinating NVAO's application for WFME (World Federation for Medical Education) recognition to obtain American certification for its medical graduates. She is an ENQA trained reviewer, and participates in a variety of ENQA activities including reviews in Spain (ANECA, 2012), Lithuania (SKVC, 2017) and Slovenia (SQAA, 2018). She was project manager of ARQATA, a three-year project (2011-2014) funded by the World Bank providing technical assistance to ANQA in Armenia. Other international experience involves reviews of off-shore medical schools in the Dutch Caribbean, and institutional audits (pilots) in Croatia and in Kazakhstan.

Proposal

Title: Bologna's Trojan Horse? Language usage in the Netherlands as a quality issue

Abstract (150 words max):

In this paper, the author gives a personal and somewhat critical view on language usage in Dutch higher education. In recent months, the increasing number of English-taught programmes in the Netherlands has become a topic of hot debate. Are universities in the Netherlands trendsetters or simply out of control? The author finds that concerns about English usage in higher education should be addressed from the perspective of quality assurance. And NVAO as the quality assurance agency



in the Netherlands should be able to safeguard the quality of programmes within this increasingly internationally oriented setting.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? Yes

If yes, give details.

1. A previous version in Dutch was published by ScienceGuide.nl, 12 May 2018
(Title: Het Trojaanse paard van Bologna. Internationalisering is een kwaliteitsvraagstuk)
2. An abridged version was published by Times Higher Education, 14 June 2018
(Title: Language usage in the Netherlands is a quality issue)

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Bologna's Trojan Horse? Language usage in the Netherlands as a quality issue

In the Netherlands, the increasing number of English-taught programmes in higher education continues to be a topic of hot debates. One can applaud the well-developed international learning community with English as the lingua franca. One can also question these developments given the far-reaching consequences at different levels of Dutch society.

Any concern about English usage in higher education should be addressed from the perspective of quality assurance. In the ongoing discussions, stakeholders often refer to NVAO¹ as the quality assurance agency in the Netherlands to safeguard the quality of programmes within this increasingly internationally oriented setting. Following the recent vision statement of the minister of education on internationalisation (Van Engelshoven, 2018), NVAO is now considering quality criteria to look more specifically at language choice and language use when assessing programmes.

Writing this paper in English debating the widespread use of that same language illustrates the exact 'paradox of internationalisation' (Maex, 2018) higher education is facing in the Netherlands and possibly in the whole European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Perhaps an act of quiet and modest rebellion is called for before even starting to discuss the issue at hand; a summary in Dutch will follow each paragraph in English, if only as a statement.

Dat het Nederlands hoger onderwijs in rap tempo verengelt, is voor de een het succesverhaal van Bologna, voor de ander een ongewild bijeffect van verregaande internationalisering. In elk geval kan de onderwijskwaliteit niet ter discussie staan; de NVAO ziet daarop toe. Om de essentie van het artikel kracht bij te zetten sluit een Nederlandstalige samenvatting elke paragraaf in het Engels af. Een stil en bescheiden protest.

Figures are staggering

Statistics show that higher education in the Netherlands is becoming predominately English (Huberts & Vlek de Coningh, 2017). In 2017-2018, some 23% of the bachelor's programmes at research universities are offered in English; 74% of the master's programmes. Universities of applied sciences offer considerably less programmes in English. Figures for 2017-2018 have not been finalised yet but the 2016-2017 data show that 5% of the programmes at bachelor's and 25% at master's level are English-taught.

Within the EHEA, the Netherlands have always been leading in English-taught education followed by Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Globally, also at Dutch universities, the most popular fields for English education are Business and Economics, and Engineering and Technology (Brenn-White &

¹ Accreditation Organisation in the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)



Faethe, 2013). Together they account for half of the English-taught programmes. A 2017 study by the European Association for International Education (EAIE) in 19 European countries shows that by now the Netherlands have the highest percentage of universities offering English-taught bachelor's programmes (Sandström & Neghina, 2017).

In 2017-2018, 12% of the student population in Dutch higher education is non-Dutch. Compared to 2016-2017, this means a growth of 9.3%. Putting two and two together, the fast growth of the student population in Dutch higher education is clearly related to the increasing number of English-taught programmes.

Volgens recente cijfers van Nuffic is inmiddels 23% van de universitaire bacheloropleidingen Engelstalig en 74% van de masteropleidingen. In de hogescholen ligt dat percentage beduidend lager maar ook daar ruikt het Engels op. Daarmee is Nederland koploper in Europa. Mede als gevolg van het brede aanbod aan Engelstalige opleidingen in Nederland is ook het aantal buitenlandse studenten flink gestegen: 12% in 2017-2018, of een groei van 9.3% ten opzichte van 2016-2017.

Bologna avant la lettre

For years, the Dutch government has stimulated the exchange of international staff and students and supported universities' efforts to broaden their scope. This has put higher education in the Netherlands one-step ahead of the Bologna Process; by now, nobody questions the concept of the international classroom, or the status of English as the dominant language of science.

Yet in recent months, English-medium instruction has become a topic of hot debate. Are universities in the Netherlands trendsetters or simply out of control, having forgotten the quintessence of education in the national context?

The Dutch Language Union was among the first to publish a critical report (Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren, 2016). A year later, former minister of education Jet Bussemaker asked the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW, 2017) to look into the matter. The academy's report concludes that the language of instruction must be a matter of conscious choice at programme level. The Association of Universities in the Netherlands followed up by stating that that decision should be taken in consultation with staff and students (VSNU, 2017). Mid-May 2018, the universities presented a more extensive paper on internationalisation and quality of education (Vereniging Hogescholen & Vereniging van Universiteiten, 2018). All higher education institutions in the Netherlands agreed to reconsider their language policy and seem to opt more consciously for bilingual education.

Previously, Karen Maex, rector of the University of Amsterdam, called for diversity and international background to be considered when composing an international classroom. Differentiating between programmes with a 'touch of English' and English-taught programmes Maex endorses the VSNU's point of view. She advocates 'a bilingual, internationally oriented and culturally integrated university'. As to prove her point, Maex addressed her audience in English when delivering her speech on the international paradox (Maex, 2018). This did not pass unnoticed especially since Karen Maex is Belgian. Her native country is known for its strict laws on the usage of foreign languages at all levels of government including education.

Most recently, the non-profit organisation Better Education Netherlands (BON) campaigning to promote education quality lost a court case against the Inspectorate of Higher Education and two universities, claiming that anglicising higher education is in violation of the Higher Education Act. The law requires that all education be in Dutch unless there is a good reason for another language. The judge found that both universities provided convincing evidence for the language choice to comply with the law. Although its claims were rejected, BON is not discouraged by the outcome and expects additional quality controls on English-medium instruction (BON, 2018). These latest developments in the ongoing battle over language issues in Dutch higher education also caught the attention of the international press (Times Higher Education and *duz - deutsche Universitätszeitung*, June 2018).



Niemand betwist de aantoonbare voordelen van internationalisering en de onmiskenbare rol van Engels in het hoger onderwijs en de wetenschap. Wel worden stakeholders steeds kritischer over de verregaande verengelsing van het Nederlandse hoger onderwijs. Velen roeren zich in het debat en de eerste rechtszaak is een feit.

Quality issues

Debating the pros and cons of English-taught programmes inevitably leads to a discussion of the growth of the international student population in the Netherlands. This is seen as a direct result of the easy accessibility of higher education to non-Dutch students; not many European countries offer so many high-quality and affordable programmes in English. After all, in 2017 the OECD² identified quality education, tuition fees and language of instruction amongst the main determinants for studying abroad. The growing numbers, however, are reason enough to reconsider what internationalisation is all about as Dutch universities encounter difficulties catering for so many students. To quote Karen Maex once more: 'There are limits to growth.' Moreover, she appeals to the minister of education to regulate the great inflow of international students.

This expansion means that some higher education institutions in the Netherlands experience challenges in terms of adequate facilities and student-centred learning. In time, the latter might jeopardise the Bologna aspiration of small-scale teaching with flexible learning paths, individual guidance and timely and proper feedback.

On several occasions, students have expressed their concern about the English proficiency of both university staff and their fellow students. Staff members have made similar complaints about their students and colleagues. However, statistics do not necessarily support these grievances. Student surveys (NSE, 2017) do not show a significant difference in appreciation of programmes taught in Dutch and English, and the recent EAIE study was inconclusive about the quality of English-taught bachelor's programmes in the EHEA (Sandström & Neghina, 2017).

The peer review reports that are the basis for the programme accreditation decisions made by NVAO, occasionally mention quality issues related to English-language proficiency and growing student numbers. In one particular case and ten years after Bologna, international peers published a critical paper on the English usage in Dutch higher education. Scholtz and Stein (2009) talk about a 'wichtiger Qualitätsaspekt', and claim that it increases the difficulty level of the learning process and lowers the quality of teaching. In general, however, peers are impressed by the international teaching and learning environment. At institutional level, some NVAO audit reports mention international student growth as problematic in terms of maintaining a balanced student population, sufficient staff and adequate facilities.

Een discussie over de verengelsing gaat al snel over de massificatie van het hoger onderwijs. De vingerwijzing naar toestromende buitenlandse studenten is ook snel gemaakt. Maar kunnen instellingen de groeiende studentenaantallen aan? En wat zijn de gevolgen voor de kwaliteit van het onderwijs? De taalvaardigheid van zowel docenten als studenten is in elk geval een belangrijk kwaliteitscriterium.

Paradox of internationalisation

The challenge for all stakeholders is to find common ground on the 'paradox of internationalisation'. In a letter to parliament, present minister of education Ingrid van Engelshoven emphasises the importance of a balanced approach towards internationalisation, and underlines the full autonomy of universities for both language choice and quality assurance (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2018, 26 April). The Rathenau Institute (De Jonge & Vennekens, 2017) is one of many to argue that the debate should focus not on internationalisation but on maintaining quality.

² Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)



In June 2018, the minister presented a more detailed vision to Parliament (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2018, 6 July) in which she addresses the concerns about the growing numbers of international students and of English-taught programmes. Most stakeholders welcome the minister's policy statement although some remain vigilant. Van Engelshoven wants universities to refrain from introducing English at all departments regardless of the added value at programme level. It cannot be one size fits all. At the same time, as the minister of education, she calls upon universities to ensure the quality of education and to accommodate the needs of students and employers. Her priorities are maintaining the accessibility of higher education to *all* students and guaranteeing the quality of the teaching and learning process. In her letter and during the debate in parliament, the minister explicitly refers to NVAO for safeguarding the quality of programmes irrespective of the language of instruction.

At present, NVAO is in the process of reviewing its 2016 frameworks for accreditation involving both students and universities. The outcomes of the internationalisation debate will be incorporated in the revised quality criteria. Language choice and language skills of staff will be included at programme level. In the external assessments of both existing and new programmes, peers will consider the rationale for the choice of language of instruction, and examine the impact of language usage on curriculum quality and student achievement.

In time, additional quality criteria at institutional level could be considered. First, the university's language policy could become part of institutional audits: to what extent does the policy support a balanced international classroom? How does the university cope with the growing numbers of students in terms of quality? Second, the approval of representative bodies of students and staff could be required in matters of internationalisation in general and language of instruction in particular. At the moment, however, there is no legal basis for defining these criteria and applying them in the NVAO audits of universities.

Including quality criteria on internationalisation and all it entails in the university's internal and external quality assurance systems is one amongst many steps in the right direction. Such moves would offer universities terms of reference for reviewing their international goals and action plans, and put them in the lead on identifying and responding to quality issues related to internationalisation and language use. Some universities might find themselves at the risky end of the international stick; others will find they followed a safer course. Either way, they will have to meet the NVAO quality criteria in the revised frameworks based on a *communis opinio* that a balanced approach towards internationalisation is called for.

Een eenduidig antwoord op de internationale paradox blijft uit. De minister van onderwijs presenteert een evenwichtige visie op de ontstane commotie rondom internationalisering en verengelsing. In haar kamerbrief biedt ze volop ruimte voor internationalisering zolang de kwaliteit van het onderwijs erbij gebaat is. De NVAO werkt inmiddels aan aanvullende kwaliteitscriteria voor opleidingen die kiezen voor onderwijs in het Engels. En de auteur meent dat de NVAO in een volgende fase wellicht ook expliciet kan kijken naar het taalbeleid op instellingsniveau. Het is immers in ieders belang om de kwaliteit van het Nederlandse hoger onderwijs blijvend te garanderen.

Michèle P. Wera is a policy adviser for NVAO in The Hague; she wrote the article in her personal capacity.

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Discussion questions:

1. How would you characterise the language usage in your country, at your university? What aspects outlined in this paper would apply to your situation?
2. How can HEI ensure the quality of foreign language provision? How does internal quality assurance deal with language issues? (IQA)
3. What role could quality assurance agencies have in language usage in higher education? (EQA)
4. The author expresses her personal interest in internationalisation and her somewhat critical views on the increasing number of English-taught programmes in the Netherlands and the quality issues that come with it. Are we really talking about a Trojan Horse within Bologna – mind the question mark in the title – or is this an evident overstatement?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.