

Squaring the pyramid: internationalization, plurilingualism, and the university

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Abstract

Universities are by definition arguably concerned with seeking and extending knowledge across national and linguistic boundaries. The concept of the university after all predates the concept of the nation-state. University education may well imply acquiring competences to extract knowledge from sources in other languages or convey knowledge and skills to speakers of other languages. To this extent universities are internationalized. However, for reasons such as economic development, globalization, demographics, universities are embarking on a new phase in internationalization, one which increasingly involves recruiting students and staff from across the world.

An internationalizing university today will often establish a policy that overtly or covertly implies English-medium education, while at the same time expressing public support for language development. Yet in practice this may not amount to bilingual or multilingual education. In this paper we compare the practices of internationalization with respect to language in two faculties at Maastricht University, economics and health sciences.

We conclude that the policy of internationalization as practised at Maastricht University implies education through English. While internationalization may mean multilingualism at institutional level, we recommend that at Maastricht it is plurilingualism at the individual level that should be stimulated.

1. Introduction: The pyramid

Let's start with the pyramid, or to be technically correct the equilateral tetrahedron. We are using it as a metaphor for sets of factors influencing the bilingual or multilingual university, as shown in Figure 1.

At the base we have the institution itself, the university: the set of factors here includes the system in which the university is vested, the structure of the academy and administration, the ethos, philosophy, mission, goals, etc., of the institution, and the physical entities (the people, the buildings, etc.). One face represents the set of factors under education, and here we find programme selection, curriculum design, course design, instructional methods, logistics, etc., as well as quality assurance and quality promotion; in other words, this is what the institution does to produce its output. A second face represents external factors to the institution, which we have called here internationalization: these include well-known economic factors, social factors, competition policy, globalization, and all factors that shape the environment in which the institution produces its output.

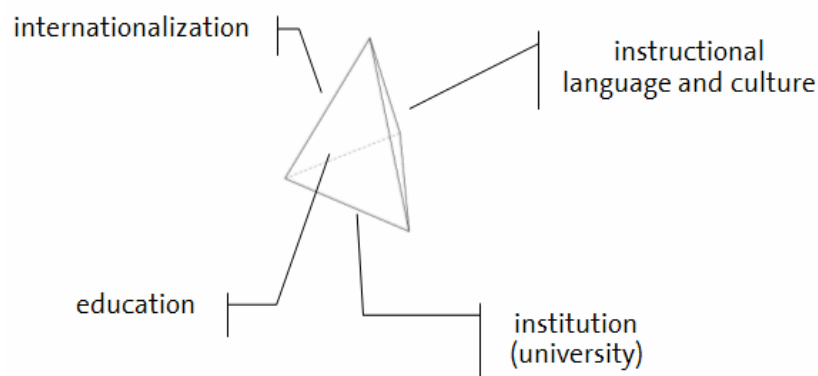


Figure 1: Model of factor sets influencing the bilingual or multilingual university

The final face reflects the instructional language and culture. In many institutions this will be the national language (or one of them). However, in some bilingual institutions it may cover two of the national languages (e.g. the University of Helsinki). In other institutions it may be a foreign or second language that has become the principal language of instruction (e.g. English). Yet numerous universities are offering programmes in the national language(s) and in English too, and to some extent we may call these institutions multilingual. We have added ‘culture’ here too; partly because bilingual universities may indeed promote the national cultures of the two languages, but also because the instructional language itself carries a culture with it, which may not be the culture of any one language, but rather a transcendence of organizational culture (cf. Hofstede, 1997) and national cultures. Education through the medium of English in a non-English-speaking country, for example, may not carry much of the national culture of English-speaking cultures, but rather the culture of the instructional English itself is mediated by the local national culture, the institutional and educational organizational culture, and the linguistic cultures of the actors (students and staff). Plurilingualism in our title refers to the effective use of several languages by individual members of the institution (staff, students), and covers the ease of switching according to social and educational contexts: it is thus an individual concept, not present in the figure above.

We do not claim that this metaphorical tetrahedron covers all sets of factors influencing bilingual or multilingual universities: we are using it for simplicity to convey an idea and make comparisons.

2. Pyramids of two faculties

The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEBA) at Maastricht University is one of the university’s faculties where teaching takes place through the medium of English exclusively. Being a big faculty with ca. 4000 students, it has a quite long tradition of English-medium teaching with the first full English-medium programme being taught as early as 1987. However, it should be noted that while there is much teaching in English, there is actually little teaching of English. In fact, over the last few years English language teaching has declined from courses offered in the first, second and third year (adding up to a total of over 80 contact hours and worth approximately the equivalent of 8 ECTS) to one single academic writing skills training (12 contact hours, cf. Lawrence & Zegers, 2005) for first year students only. Still the level of

English among both staff and students is quite high.

Taking our pyramid model, we can redraw the factors as shown in Figure 2.

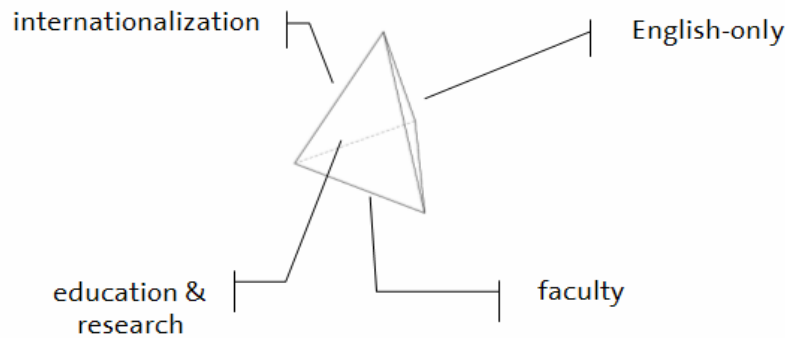


Figure 2: Pyramid model of Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Maastricht University

At the base, we have the faculty, one of the seven in the university, with its specific structure of academy and administration etc. (see above). The educational face at this faculty is characterized by specific programme selection, curriculum and course design, problem-based learning as the instructional method at Maastricht University, high quality research, etc. Naturally, internationalization plays an important role at the faculty of Economics, as shown for instance in its many links with high-quality institutions abroad, AACSB accreditation, and recently EQUIS accreditation. English is the only language used in instruction; however, individual staff and students speak many other languages, which leads to limited code-switching in social and educational contexts.

In comparison, the Faculty of Health Sciences, with ca. 2000 students one of the medium-sized faculties in Maastricht, has a tradition of Dutch-medium teaching. At the Bachelors level, it offers seven variants, which are mainly focused on the Dutch healthcare market. In addition, it offers several Master's programmes (MSc, MPhil, Research Masters). While most instruction takes place in Dutch, there is also some teaching of English and other languages.

Using the pyramid model again, this faculty can be characterized as shown in Figure 3. The pyramid model of the factors influencing the Faculty of Health Sciences looks very similar to the model of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Again, we find the faculty at the base of the pyramid, and education and research on the first face. Internationalization is the second face, which again looks similar and is realized through, for example, links with institutions abroad and various forms of research collaboration. The third side, representing the language and culture of instruction, is the most interesting in our context. Here, we see that Dutch is the most important language of instruction. The faculty is largely domestic, with quite a significant number of German-speaking students. At the same time, most of the literature is in English. As in the other faculty, limited code-switching in social and educational contexts can be observed.

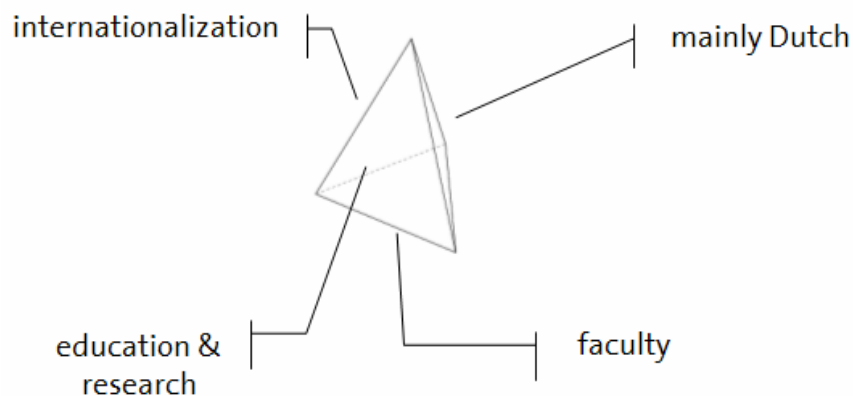


Figure 3: Pyramid model of Faculty of Health Sciences at Maastricht University

English-medium teaching at the Faculty of Health Sciences is just starting. However, a convincing framework has been developed, and quite a considerable amount of language training has been integrated in the different study programmes. In the first year, the focus is on confidence building and English speaking and discussion skills. In the second semester of the second year, some English-medium courses are introduced and students have to follow a research writing skills training in English. In the third year, more English-taught courses follow, some of which are optional. Finally, during the Master's programmes, students receive academic writing and professional communication skills support. The faculty has invested much money, not only in English language training for students but also in training for staff, both scientific and administrative.

3. Internationalization vs. plurilingualism

First, it is important to distinguish between multilingualism and plurilingualism. These are different concepts which entail different approaches in an institution that adopts either as the goal. It is a question of the institutional or individual level. Plurilingualism is clearly defined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4). It means diversifying the individual's use of languages in cultural contexts; interlocutors may switch between languages and dialects in order to achieve effective communication. Both of us, for example, switch continuously between three or four languages within the same conversation, even within sentences. Plurilingualism is then an individual concept. Multilingualism, however, implies the co-occurrence of more than one language in society. Societies can achieve multilingualism simply by making more languages available for learning in universities and schools. Individuals may learn another language as a foreign or second language to communicate with others in different societies or with others in the same society. So multilingualism is an institutional or societal construct. A university can be multilingual, but its members may be plurilingual.

This look at definitions shows that when an institution, in this case a university, decides to become multilingual, it is vital that the official policy and the goals that the institution wants to achieve need to be very clear.

It may be asked whether Maastricht is actually a bi-, multi- or plurilingual university or rather an international one. Internationalization does not necessarily imply multilingualism or

plurilingualism. An institution that internationalizes does not necessarily mean that it offers additional languages, or even teaching in a different language. An international university basically means one that is not vested in a national system; that is, for example, a university with a European base – cultures and systems – but not grounded in the legal and educational system of one country. Traditionally, universities have been city-based institutions with elements of international cooperation and collaboration. The vision to become truly international needs to be driven by the leadership and backed by the stakeholders (staff, students, investors, clients, authorities). An international university is one that changes constantly, as it adapts to a diverse, global environment. It adopts flexible, multidisciplinary approaches to its education. And moreover, internationalization has to be the life, culture, curriculum, instruction, and research of the university (Ellingboe, 1998; Bartell, 2003; Ritzen, 2004).

The faculties presented above may be called international in a way that at the Faculty of Economics there are ca. 1600 (40%) foreign regular students. Approximately 34% (ca. 80 FTE) of its teaching and research staff, and 8% (6.3 FTE) of its administrative staff are non-Dutch. In Health Sciences, the same holds true for ca. 200 (9%) of the regular students, 32 FTE (9%) of the teaching and research staff, and 13 FTE (8%) of the administrative staff. High percentages of these foreign students and staff are from Germany and Belgium; so it may be asked whether these can be called very foreign, especially taking Maastricht’s specific geographical location into account. However, it is noteworthy that the third most prominent country in FEBA is China. In Health Sciences, there are also noticeable numbers of students from developing countries, especially in the public health programmes.

It is interesting to see whether, in the English-only FEBA, a plurilingualism effect can be observed. Currently between 11-15% of FEBA foreign students study Dutch. Between 4.5% and 8% of FEBA students study a foreign language, as shown in Figure 4.

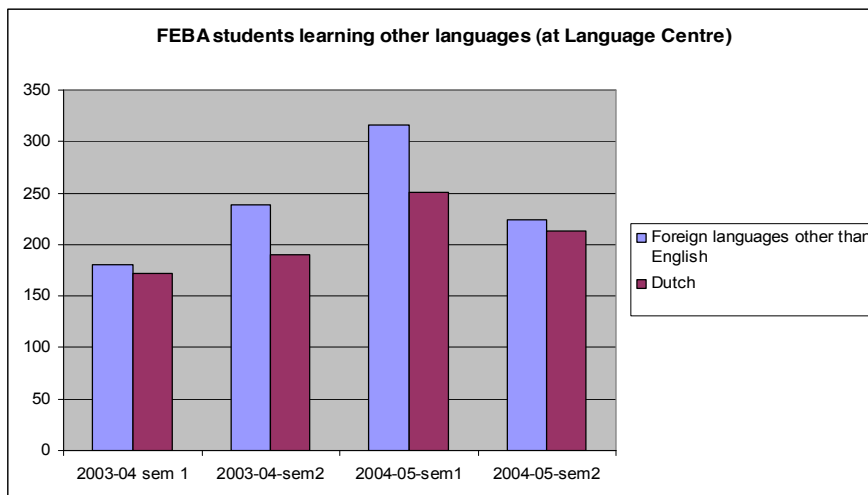


Figure 4. Numbers of FEBA students who studied a language other than English in the academic years 2003-04 and 2004-05.

The sharp increase in foreign language learning in the first semester of 2004-05 was mainly due to a jump in the numbers of those learning French (almost doubling from an average of about 60 per semester to nearly 120); the reasons for this jump are not known. Equally noticeable is the rather low numbers studying German (averaging under 20 per semester): this is probably because

a large number of the foreign students are German, and the feeling among Dutch students that they can get by in German anyhow.

To sum up, the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, where English is the only medium of instruction, can be called a truly international faculty regarding its staff and student population. With its high reputation and quality it is attractive for international students. Its graduates also work internationally. While the faculty policy highlights internationalization, it does not mention language at all. There is very little English language teaching and at the moment, there is no stimulus for other language skills. (However, this used to be different. Actually, the multilingual facets of the programmes offered by the faculty seem to have been one of the attractive parts of the programmes in the past. Currently, a framework for integrating foreign language components is under discussion again.) Internationalization also seems to lie at the core of the disciplines today: economics and business studies are widely treated as international, and consequently are by far the commonest degree programmes offered in English in Europe (Maiworm & Wächter, 2002).

The Faculty of Health Sciences, on the other hand, is a Dutch faculty which is in the process of internationalizing. It started small but change is happening rapidly. There is much language stimulus, and language development has a prominent place. However, this is restricted to English and there is no stimulus for other language skills. If the English-medium programmes prove successful, Health Sciences may well follow the route of Economics. If this proves so, then we may expect high faculty staff turnover as recruitment would have to become more international.

However, one big difference between the two faculties must be taken into account. Unlike Economics and Business graduates, health scientists usually work in national systems and within local cultures. This underlines the important role of language and cultural training.

This brief presentation of the two faculties at Maastricht University suggests that the only way for a university to become international is through English-medium teaching. At the same time, chances for educational instruction through other foreign languages seem to be minimal. Due to time and money constraints, among others, language development will largely happen implicitly, and with often little attention being paid to fluency in one or even several foreign languages, there is a risk that graduates will be linguistically mono-dimensional.

An institution of higher education that wants to take the issues of internationalization and plurilingualism seriously needs to carefully consider the issues outlined above. On a policy level, the right decisions have to be discussed and taken. This includes a consistent and effective policy on the teaching of English but also the teaching of academic literacies. Second, policy makers need to decide whether they want to restrict the principle of bilingualism/plurilingualism to the individual level or whether they want to actively support the teaching and learning of other languages, including the question if and how they should and could be linked more closely to subject teaching.

4. Conclusion: Squaring the pyramid

If we do not want graduates to be fluent only in their language of university instruction (and possibly be restricted to very specific genres as well), we suggest that the pyramid of university education should be squared and thus become a real pyramid in the first place. We feel that it is necessary to add a fourth face, namely other languages and cultures, as a face in its own right which should be given just as much room as the other three (see Figure 5).

At the institutional level, plurilingualism among students could be promoted by adding credit-bearing options to study other languages (cultures) to regular study programmes. In Maastricht, the so-called “taalkrediet” (language credit) programme has been run successfully in two faculties for several years now. In the early phase of such a project, it may be sensible to set ratchet targets for faculty goals. For example, at the start of a language credit system, the target could be that 10% of a faculty’s students should get credits in a foreign language. If the language credit system is accepted well by students and staff, the targets could be increased. Above all, it is important that the goals concerning internationalization and plurilingualism be built into the institutional policy. This way, in our universities, we might be able to build real pyramids which may last for many centuries.

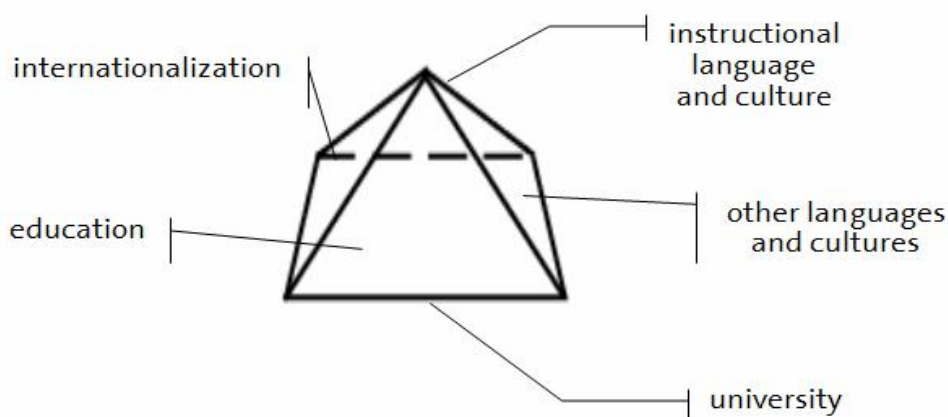


Figure 5: Pyramid model of the ‘truly’ international and multilingual university.

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