

Internationalisering in Balans: Response

13 September 2023

1 Vraag 1

This policy is not a good idea. While I am proficient in Dutch, I write this response in English to emphasize that discussions about internationalization in Dutch education must involve and address the thousands of international personnel in Dutch universities. In 2015, one in three scientific personnel in Dutch universities were non-Dutch nationals (Koier et al. 2017); that proportion has almost certainly increased since then. Dutch universities rely on international staff to conduct research and teach courses. The way these international staff and the universities that employ them will be forced to respond to this policy will harm universities, students, and Dutch society in the long run.

Principally, the language policy will harm teaching quality. A 33% cap on English-language classes will likely have immediate impacts on many programs given that 47% of bachelor programs were offered either exclusively in English or in a mix of English and Dutch last year (Nuffic 2022). The practical path forward for international staff at universities under this policy will likely require a large number of staff to learn Dutch for the very first time. The pressure of this time-intensive task will divert countless hours away from research and teaching activities. Many will succeed in learning Dutch, but will subsequently be forced to go from teaching university courses in English – a language with which almost all academics in the Netherlands have a near-lifetime of experience – to a language they have just recently finished coursework in. Many of those that fail or refuse to learn Dutch will be laid off or leave the Netherlands. This will result in a substantial loss of expertise that could have otherwise been imparted onto Dutch students. Even for the professors that remain, departments will be forced to rearrange teaching assignments not by expertise but by language. This will often prevent students from being taught by researchers in the fields in which

they specialize.

It is short-sighted to argue that deterring talented international students from entering Dutch bachelor programs will improve teacher-to-student ratios. In the short-run, there will be a reduction in incoming students because entire bachelor programs will be forced to switch languages or be eliminated entirely. However, universities will lose considerable tuition revenue from this decline. The Dutch government will likely be unable to dedicate financial assistance to make up the lost funding due to the large negative impacts that a reduction of international students will have on the Dutch tax base. A rising number of foreign students are staying in the Netherlands after their study. While that proportion was historically stable at around 20% of international graduates, the proportion of international graduates who stayed in the Netherlands after graduation rose to 32% in the 2018-2019 school year CBS 2023. Because these remaining students contribute to the Dutch tax base, the CPB finds that the average international university student from within the EEA contributes 16,900 euros to public balances over their lifetime, with that number rising to 96,300 euros for international university students from outside the EEA (Bolhaar, Kuijpers, and Nibbelink 2019; see Table 5.5). With 41,942 new international applicants in the last academic year (Nuffic 2022), the language policy need only yield small reductions in the inflow of international students to cost the Dutch government millions of euros. Absent added funding, Dutch universities will not be able to retain the same number of professors. Through a combination of layoffs, hiring freezes, and tenure denials, universities will be forced to lose substantial academic talent and release professors as a direct result of the policy, driving student-teacher ratios back toward present levels.

This brings me to the final point: this language policy will have profound negative impacts on scientific research in the Netherlands. International staff are a competitive and vital part of the Dutch research sector. 44% of doctoral candidates in the Netherlands are non-Dutch as of 2015 (Koier et al. 2017), along with a third of Vidi laureates and a quarter of Vici laureates as of 2018 (KNAW 2018). Several sectors and universities are deeply reliant on English-speaking international talent. As of 2015, 40% or more scientific personnel in economics, natural sciences, and technology were internationals, including half of all scientific personnel at TU Eindhoven and 48% of those at TU Delft (Koier et al. 2017); again, those numbers have likely since increased. It has been long recognized that an openness to English-language communication on campus is key to recruiting such international personnel. KNAW (2017; 2018) attributes this to the comfort and openness that speaking in English, rather than Dutch, tends to yield for international staff, making

the Netherlands an attractive destination for researchers. It is worth noting that the government proposing a policy to manage education demand by explicitly and exclusively targeting international students sours this welcoming environment (Universiteiten van Nederland 2023), a fact that would no doubt be worsened if the policy is actually adopted. Further, a seldom-discussed consequence of this policy is the fact that universities will often find themselves unable to hire the most talented candidates for new positions due to language constraints. Once universities shift their existing international personnel to English-language teaching assignments, the lack of available English-language teaching assignments for incoming international hires will force universities to consider existing Dutch language proficiency when making hiring decisions, making it significantly harder to hire international researchers even when an international researcher is the right person for the job. The tectonic shifts in hiring that this policy will produce are now difficult to conceptualize, and universities' newfound limitations on recruiting international talent will contribute to considerable brain drain in the Netherlands at a time when scientific research on health, the economy, and the environment are sorely needed.

The world watched the mistakes the United Kingdom made when they turned their back on the international community by withdrawing from the European Union. I urge the Dutch government to not follow in their footsteps by restricting English-language teaching in universities.

2 Vraag 2

Dutch universities have responded with a counter-proposal that would instead focus on encouraging language skills by dedicating resources to voluntary extracurricular Dutch language learning, both for internationals and for Dutch students (Universiteiten van Nederland 2023). This is a reasonable alternative. The cost of attending formal courses is likely a substantial barrier for those interested in learning (academic) Dutch. Universities offering funding or free coursework to students for Dutch education would likely increase uptake, increasing the value of international students to Dutch society by promoting their integration into the Dutch labor market and Dutch society.

A key consideration is that any policy arising from the counter-proposal should be centered on voluntary Dutch education, and should not be seen as a strategy by which incoming international students can be made to start their bachelor in English and finish in Dutch. Bachelor programs almost universally require students to have B2 proficiency per CEFR standards. To give context,

VU-NT2 – where I received some of my Dutch-language training – advertises that (pending no course failures) it is possible for someone to go from no Dutch experience to B2 within a calendar year. However, this occurs over five course blocks, each of which is nine ECTS worth of work. This intensive pathway requires attending three-hour lectures three to four times per week, in addition to hours of self-study each week. Some courses can achieve B2 proficiency faster, but only by requiring students to meet more frequently and perform more self-study. For instance, UvA Talen – another institution at which I studied – offers intensive courses that can in theory bring someone from no Dutch experience to the B2 level in four months (again, assuming no course failures). However, this requires 2.5 hours per day of lectures five days per week, along with copious self-study. There is simply no way to reduce the approximately 450 hours required to learn the Dutch language. This is why foreign language education for Dutch high school students is spread out over many years. Requiring international students to undertake this pathway within the span of their bachelor would be an unreasonable burden. A first-year student undertaking 45 ECTS of Dutch language coursework alongside 60 ECTS of bachelor coursework is functionally impossible. Even if this requirement was only required to be satisfied by the end of the bachelor, adding 15 ECTS per year to education requirements for international students would increase their ECTS burden by 25% each year.

This increased burden from a mandatory Dutch language learning policy would produce a myriad of negative impacts. First, the burden of learning Dutch would serve as a substantial deterrent to international applicants, who may be averse to adding such a burden to bachelor studies that are already challenging. Further, those who do take on this burden will either have to complete language coursework alongside schoolwork or during school vacations. Under the former option, the added time pressure of the language learning will reduce the amount of time available for study, increasing course failures and delaying graduations. Under the latter option, international students will be precluded from taking vacations that Dutch students have time to enjoy. This will no doubt increase burnout and thereby worsen educational outcomes. In either case, many opportunities for educational enrichment will be out of reach, such as honors programs and exchange programs.

In addition, Dutch language learning requirements will have negative economic impacts – such requirements will reduce the fiscal benefit of international students during the duration of their study. This effect runs through two channels. First, the aforementioned increases in course failures will likely yield delays in graduation for international students, increasing fiscal burdens through higher tuition costs. Second, international students will be less available to take up part-time jobs

and summer jobs in the Netherlands. This has both short-term and long-term fiscal impacts. In the short term, there will be an immediate reduction in the tax base due to a reduction in the number of students taking up jobs alongside their study. This risk is relevant for the 72.1% of international students who originate from the EEA, thereby having working rights in the Netherlands (Nuffic 2022), and concerns a considerable working population, given that 85% of higher education students in the Netherlands have a part-time job (CBS 2020). In the long term, students who do not have the time to take up jobs will lose opportunities to form vital connections with local businesses that may have otherwise translated into long-term job offers. This will reduce the number of international students who remain in the Netherlands after their study due to post-graduation job offers. While this reduction in students who stay due to job offers may be (partially) offset by the increase in students who stay due to knowing the local language, this latter outcome can be achieved in a much less costly manner by adopting the current Universiteiten van Nederland proposal to create costless Dutch language training for university students.

Given that the current Universiteiten van Nederland counter-proposal emphasizes Dutch language training for both Dutch and international students, it is also foreseeable that this policy could evolve into an attempt to ‘equalize’ the burden for Dutch and international students by mandating Dutch language learning requirements for both international and Dutch students. This could take one of two routes, both of which would be harmful. The first route would involve mandating Dutch language learning in addition to existing coursework. Under this plan, all the harms discussed in the previous two paragraphs would be extended to Dutch students as well. The second route would involve incorporating Dutch language education as a part of all bachelor programs, consisting of basic Dutch training for international students and academic Dutch training for Dutch students. This route would yield a host of negative impacts. To equalize the degree of Dutch training across students, programs would need to allocate 45 ECTS to Dutch language training across the entire bachelor. If this was achieved through extending the length of bachelor programs by a year, this plan would egregiously increase the fiscal burdens of providing education and delay labor market entry, thereby reducing the tax base. If these 45 ECTS were condensed into existing bachelor programs, this would require bachelor programs to sacrifice nearly a year’s worth of teaching material, seriously constraining the breadth and depth of material that can be taught to students and causing students to graduate knowing much less about the subjects they study than they would have absent the mandatory language policy.

There is no route to mandatory Dutch education that does not result in serious economic and educational harm. The voluntary Dutch language education proposal of Universiteiten van Nederland, coupled with commitments to provide subsidized and costless Dutch language education for university students, achieves the goal of promoting Dutch language learning in the best manner possible.