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Language policy in higher education in Flanders: Legislation and actual practice

Abstract: This article discusses a number of linguistic aspects of the internationalisation and anglicisation of higher education in Flanders. We aim to combine an overview of the applicable legal measures with the most detailed and complete information to date on the actual linguistic practices in universities and university colleges. To this end, we collected the most recent available data from a variety of official reports and databases on parameters including the number of English bachelor and master programmes currently on offer, the relative share of students involved in these international programmes, as well as the extent to which students and professors meet official language requirements. Next to these English-focused aspects, we also supply new figures on the required mother tongue proficiency to enrol in the regular Dutch-based curriculum (theory versus practice). The situation in the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium is then compared to that of the French-speaking Community, once again based on figures and data that were collated from a variety of official sources. All data indicate that the actual impact of anglicisation in Flemish universities and university colleges remains limited and unproblematic, compared to the situation in many other medium-sized language communities. The closing discussion advocates a language policy for higher education in Flanders that combines a strong focus on mother tongue proficiency with a solid training in English for academic purposes.

Keywords: Language policy, higher education, anglicisation, Flanders, Belgium, Dutch-speaking Community

1 Introduction

The anglicisation of higher education in Flanders – and in the Dutch language area at large – triggers a steady flow of debate in the Flemish public sphere. This tendency is underscored by outspoken op-ed contributions in national newspapers, parliamentary debates, dedicated conferences and workshops, edited volumes and journal issues,
as well as authoritative statements from scientific academies on the topic.¹ Within the universities, the position of English in teaching and research is the subject of a tug-of-war between a small but eloquent group of pro-Dutch academics foregrounding pedagogical and historical arguments, pragmatic and budget-conscious rectors championing internationalization and its influx of high tuition fees, and members of parliament and ministers trying to please the gut feeling of their electorate.

This article is not intended to enumerate all arguments used in these debates, nor to repeat my personal position in the polemic², given the fact that the catalogue of pros and cons is readily available in a variety of dedicated articles and books (Oosterhof et al. 2010, e. g.). An additional observation to be made is that these arguments largely remained the same over the past ten years. Pro-Dutch activists refer to the danger of functional language loss in the scholarly domain, to the hard-won language struggle that ousted French from its prestige status in Flemish academia as recent as 1930, to the mix of broken English and ’Denglish’ used by non-native professors, and to cognitive and educational setbacks caused by foreign-medium instruction (Deneckere et al. 2016, 2017a/b, 2020). Advocates of anglicization scheme with the need to attract excellent academics and students worldwide, refer to the direly needed extra revenues brought in by formerly unsolicited students, and to the wish to play a key role in crucial domains of a rapidly evolving and globalized scientific ‘playing field’.

Our aim here is threefold. After a brief sketch of the necessary historical background on the Flemish education landscape, we first want to give a concise description of the current legal framework that determines possible language choice and effective language use in higher education in Flanders. Next, we aim to present a series of relevant data on the effective presence and impact of English on teaching in Flemish universities and university colleges. We deem this to be useful because the discussion on this topic remains all too often focused on the sheer percentage of English-taught bachelor’s and master’s programmes in Flanders. We will try and present additional figures that relate to many other aspects of the Flemish language legislation, including the language mastery of teaching staff and students alike. We will also try and compare these data with the situation in Belgium’s French-speaking community, thus complementing the ubiquitous comparison with the vigorous anglicization of universities in Netherlands. We conclude with a brief discussion on the position of Dutch in Flanders compared to other medium-sized languages, and on the challenges for Flemish universities in the internationalization debate.

¹ The highly partisan pro-Dutch ‘association of Flemish academics’ lists many of these initiatives in a dedicated overview on its website: http://vvacademici.org/taal_hoger_onderwijs.html; last access on 7 May 2020.
2 Historical background

Ever since 1963 primary and secondary education in Belgium is organized, in principle, along the sociolinguistic principle of territoriality: the official language of the region is the vehicular language of all officially recognized educational institutions (Witte/Van Velthoven 1999: 180). In Dutch-speaking Flanders all school establishments teach in Dutch, whereas in French-speaking Wallonia French is the official language used for teaching; the Germanophone community operates an official German-speaking school network (Boemer/Darquennes 2012). Schools in bilingual Brussels either adhere to the Dutch- or the French-speaking community (and follow the according linguistic regime). A few hours per week of second and third-language instruction are an obligatory given in educational programmes across the country (Wet 1963). A limited number of French and English medium instruction (primary and secondary) schools does exist in Flanders, but these institutions are accredited by foreign governments; European and international multilingual schools in Brussels are likewise subject to a dedicated international accreditation system.

As the autonomy in educational matters was transferred from the national Belgian state to the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking Communities in 1988 (Witte/Van Velthoven 1999: 203), each of these henceforth received (and effectively used) the possibility to develop an educational policy of its own, diverging from the practices in the other Communities. As language of instruction goes, the French-speaking community facilitated and embraced the option of immersion education from 1998 onwards, which resulted in a blossoming community of more than 300 primary and secondary (predominantly Dutch) immersion schools in Wallonia. The Dutch-speaking community chose not to follow suit and opened nothing but a loophole in 2007 for a modest share of CLIL education in secondary schools in Flanders (Vandenbussche 2011).

While these changes testify to the increasing appreciation of the importance of multilingual education, territorial monolingualism absolutely remains the rule in primary and secondary education nationwide.

Institutions for higher education were exempted from the 1963 language law, but would soon after (in 1968) also become subject to the territoriality principle (Witte/Van Velthoven 1999: 184). This was a crucial demand at the time of the so-called Flemish Movement which fought the socio-economic dominance of French in Flanders and Belgium, also by securing access for Flemings to the highest walks of society through university education in Dutch.

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3 According to the latest available official figures, 206 primary schools offered immersion programmes in school year 2019–2020 in the French-speaking Community (138 Dutch, 61 English, 7 German), compared to 138 secondary schools in 2017–2018 (104 Dutch, 28 English, 6 German) (http://www.enseignement.be; last access on 7 May 2020).
The fact that the Dutchification of higher education in Flanders is a relatively young phenomenon, steeped in a history of social activism, remains an important factor in present-day discussions on language policy in higher education (cf. Deneckere et al. 2016). Whereas Gent saw the Dutchification of its university in 1930, Leuven only shed its French-speaking sections after the 1968 student revolt; 30 kilometres westwards, this uproar led to the creation of the first autonomous Dutch-speaking university in Brussels in 1969 (based on the Dutch sections previously harboured by the Université Libre de Bruxelles) (Witte/Van Velthoven 1999: 184).

3 Current legislation

The prevalence of Dutch as medium of instruction in higher education was confirmed as a cornerstone of the Bologna reform legislation in Flanders in 2003. The Flemish parliament and government refined that principle over the following decade, especially with regard to the exceptions allowing for the use of English and French in tertiary course programmes.

Staff members teaching Dutch-medium courses in universities or university colleges are required to master Dutch at the C1-level of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, i.e. near native proficiency. When only teaching non-Dutch courses (as a language teacher, for example, or as a staff member of a non-Dutch BA or MA programme, see below), mastery of Dutch at the B2-level of the CEFR is still required to meet the administrative language skills complementing an academic professional assignment. Failure to meet this requirement after 5 years leads to dismissal; there further is an intermediary (but not sanctioned) goal of reaching the A2 level in 2 years’ time.

Students entering any Dutch-medium BA or MA programme at a Flemish university (college) are expected to be proficient in Dutch at the B2-level of the CEFR. Given that any successful alumnus of a secondary school in Flanders is automatically assumed to have met this criterion, only ‘foreign’ students (including alumni from French-language schools in Belgium) are ever expected to attest this knowledge.

In Flanders, a maximum of 18.33% of all courses in initial bachelor degrees can now be taught in a different language than Dutch (i.e. less than 33 out of 180 ECTS). That share is extended to 50% for initial master programmes (i.e. 30 out of 60 ECTS for a one-year programme). Programmes surpassing these thresholds are automatically considered as ‘non-Dutch programmes’, even if the larger share of the courses

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4 This paragraph draws (and paraphrases) most information from VLOR (2017), as well as from the Codex Hoger Onderwijs (2013–2019).
5 A proposal to raise this percentage to 50% did not make the final cut of the 2020 decree on higher education (Memorie 2020).
would still be taught in Dutch. A bachelor’s degree with 135 ECTS of Dutch courses and 45 ECTS of English courses, for example, will be officially treated as a ‘foreign language’-taught programme.

The Flemish government further put a strict cap on the overall number of foreign language programmes allowed. The share of bachelor’s degrees allowed to deviate from the principle of higher education in Dutch was first limited to 6% of all BA-programmes at Flemish universities and university colleges – a figure that was recently raised to 9% by the newly elected Flemish Government (Memorie 2020). A maximum of 35% of all Flemish master’s programmes can be taught in a language different than Dutch.

The possibility of offering these non-Dutch programmes hinges upon a high-level accreditation procedure, which requires the institution to convince a dedicated government committee of the necessity of the foreign language element. The teaching staff involved in the ‘foreign language’ taught courses need to prove their mastery of said language at the C1-level of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, i.e. near native proficiency. Enrolment as a student is conditional upon proving a B2-mastery of the foreign language. Institutions need to provide language support for staff and students alike, when necessary.

A final but crucial measure concerns the so-called ‘equivalence rule’: each non-Dutch programme organised by a Flemish institution of higher education requires the existence of an equivalent Dutch counterpart – be it not necessarily at the same university (college). While an exemption procedure exists, official figures show that this was only requested (and granted) for 17% of all accreditation applications (12 out of 71, period 2013–2017; Taalverslag 2018).

4 Facts and figures

All institutions of higher education in Flanders are required to submit an annual ‘language report’ to the Flemish ministry of education, in which they provide detailed information on all measures taken to comply with the applicable language legislation. The Flemish government in its turn collates this information with all official data on the number and nature of non-Dutch course programmes, which is then published (with a 2-year delay) in one comprehensive language report per academic year. These data allow us to chart the evolution of the key parameters listed in section 3 above.
4.1 Overview of non-Dutch programmes in the Flemish Community

‘Non-Dutch’ of ‘foreign language’ programmes in Flemish higher education are near-synonyms for ‘English medium instruction’. Apart from one trilingual (Dutch/French/English) bachelor in nursing and one master in French linguistics and literary studies, the non-Dutch offer exclusively concerns anglophone studies.

An overview of the official data on foreign language programmes from 2012–2013 to 2017–2018 convincingly shows that Flanders did not become prey to the oft-proclaimed ‘flood’ of anglicization in higher education. While the number of foreign language taught bachelor degrees doubled between 2012 and 2017 (see Table 1), the total share of 3,11% in the academic year 2017–2018 still seems to remain far below the official maximum of 6% (now 9%). With a 5% increase from 17,84% to 23,63% at the master’s level during the same interval (see Table 2), Flanders is nowhere near its threshold of 35% either.

Table 1: Evolution of foreign language bachelor programmes in Flemish higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>numerator</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denominator</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share</td>
<td>1,58%</td>
<td>1,43%</td>
<td>1,95%</td>
<td>1,85%</td>
<td>2,75%</td>
<td>3,11%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2: Evolution of foreign language master programmes in Flemish higher education

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>numerator</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denominator</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share</td>
<td>17,84%</td>
<td>19,72%</td>
<td>20,77%</td>
<td>21,59%</td>
<td>22,37%</td>
<td>23,63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not reflected in these figures, however, are the applications ‘in waiting’. Out of the 71 applications for foreign language BA and MA programmes from 2013 to 2017, 70 were accepted (see Table 3 below) – but only 40 of these appear in table 1 (8) and 2 (32) above. This backlog, combined with a surge of professional BA-applications in 2018,

6 All data and tables in this paragraph are adapted (and paraphrased) from Taalverslag (2018).
suddenly resulted in reaching the 6% barrier and confronted universities with a moratorium on further requests for English language academic bachelors.

Table 3: Evolution of the number of applications for foreign language programmes between March 2013-October 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># applications</th>
<th>March 2013</th>
<th>March 2014</th>
<th>October 2014</th>
<th>October 2015</th>
<th>October 2016</th>
<th>March 2017</th>
<th>October 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ. Colleges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ABA = academic bachelor; PBA = professional bachelor; MA = master)

The request for a ‘less rigid application of the language regulations’ in the joint rectors’ memorandum for the 2019 Flemish elections (VLIR 2018) should at least in part be seen as a reaction to this unwelcome reality. Pre and post electoral lobbying resulted in the aforementioned raise of the foreign language threshold to 9% of all Flemish bachelor programmes (enabling an extra 16 successful applications for the 5 years to come, to be shared among all institutions of higher education).

4.2 Enrolment figures for the foreign language programmes

The level of anglicisation in higher education is commonly assessed in terms of ‘how many degrees are offered in English’ and the relative share of those programmes in the full portfolio of higher education. While perfectly acceptable as an analytical approach, this method fails to show how many students are actually involved in English-language education. The most recent official figures available on enrolment in foreign language programmes in Flemish higher education (for 2015–2016) do allow for this alternative approach on the impact of the English medium programmes in Flanders, as well on the student group targeted.7

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7 All data in this paragraph collected from Taalverslag (2018: annex 4) and Ministerie (2015).
On the bachelor’s level:
- 1717 students were enrolled in an English (or multilingual) BA-programme. On a total of 183 574 BA-students in Flanders, this group represented a marginal faction of 0,9% of all Flemish BA-students.
- 48% of these students were Belgians, 52% had a different nationality
- in the obligatory equivalent programme in Dutch, 96% were Belgian and 4% foreign
- 84% of the students enrolled in the Dutch programme, as opposed to 16% in the English programme.

On the master’s level:
- 6297 students were enrolled in an English (or multilingual) MA-programme. On a total of 44 436 MA-students in Flanders, this group represented 14,2% of all MA-Flemish students.
- 51% of these students were Belgians, 49% had a different nationality
- in the obligatory equivalent programme in Dutch, 96% were Belgian and 4% foreign
- 59% of the students enrolled in the Dutch programme, as opposed to 41% in the English programme.

These figures for 2015–2016 show that any fear for massive anglicization of higher education in Flanders remains unfounded. Knowing that less than 1 percent of the total number of bachelor students actually participates in English language programmes, one cannot but marvel in disbelief at the recent outcry of nationalist fringe groups (Maes et al. 2020) over the (torpedoed) plan to permit a larger share of English courses in Flemish BA-programmes. No matter how interesting a topic their projected angst and mental anguish may be for psychologists, there is little substance in their predicted ‘identity loss’ and ‘elite estrangement from the people’.

The data for the master programmes equally underscores the relatively modest impact of English education on Flemish youngsters in the specialisation phase of their studies: more than 85% of the student cohort attends the regular Dutch-speaking MA-curriculum.

Equally revealing is fact that English-language programmes do not ‘cannibalise’ the Dutch equivalent of the degree at all. The fact that half of the students in these foreign language programmes are non-Belgians further indicates that these degrees effectively succeed in attracting an ‘unserved audience’ that would otherwise most likely not enrol at a Flemish institution.
4.3 C1-requirement in English or Dutch for teaching purposes

The requirement to prove one’s mastery of English at a C1-level for teaching purposes with a recognised test certificate, met with fierce opposition in the Flemish academic community upon the introduction of the measure in 2013–2014. The mere suggestion that certain professors might not meet the requirements was framed as a ‘cramped’ and ‘unnecessary’ symptom of political ‘populism’ on behalf of the Flemish government; having to take a formal test after years of teaching in English was deemed ‘humiliating’ for the academic staff members involved, and a ‘final spasm of extreme regulitis’ (Gutwirth 2013; Standaard 2015).

Flemish universities also bickered about the test procedure (and the international recognition thereof) and would finally settle upon the internationally validated Inter-university Test of Academic English (ITACE, developed by the 4 Flemish universities but only used by three of those), apart from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven which adopted an alternative portfolio test (Van Splunder/Engelen 2018).

Once the dust had settled in early 2015, newspapers reported that 1 out of 10 Flemish professors had failed (or refused to take) the test (Standaard 2015). A few years onwards, however, the academic revolt resembles a mouse that roared. Recent data (Taalrapport 2018) on the required proof of language proficiency for universities and university colleges now shows that 97.5% of the concerned staff actually holds the required certificate (for both types of institution alike).8

4.4 B2-requirement in Dutch for administrative purposes

‘Much ado about nothing’ does not apply at first sight, however, to the required B2-mastery of Dutch for administration and management duties, applicable to professors who are non-native speakers of Dutch. Our most recent data (Taalrapport 2018) indicate that 76.5% of all university staff members concerned (85 out of 111) did not pass the B2-exam (yet). At university colleges the group is much smaller and the percentage lower (35.7%, i.e. 5 out of 14 professors). Given the 5-year delay allowed for obtaining the certificate, these figures merely reflect a snapshot of the situation at the time of the data collection, and provide no indication of the actual success rate after that 5-year period. Meanwhile, a number of professors has effectively left Flemish academia after failing to obtain the B2-certificate, and universities continue to target this regulation as narrow-minded, counter-productive and harmful – hence, once again, their plea for a ‘less rigid application of the language regulations’ (VLIR 2018).

8 1910 out of 1963 university staff members (97.3%) and 391 out of 401 university college staff members (97.5%). Note that these figures include the required certificates for English AND Dutch (there were no isolated data for English). Dutch proficiency is usually attested through the ITNA test (Interuniversitaire Taaltest Nederlands voor Anderstaligen; ‘Interuniversity language test Dutch for allophones’).
4.5 B2-requirement in Dutch for students: theory versus practice

4.5.1. Most students enrolling in a Dutch language programme of higher education never actually need to prove their mastery of Dutch at a B2-level through a validated test. The successful completion of any secondary education programme recognised by the Flemish government automatically leads to the assumption that the student has the required language skills (in Dutch) to embark on higher studies. While universities and university colleges are obliged, accordingly, to waive the language test upon the presentation of a secondary school diploma, results of entry level tests conducted at various higher education institutions raise serious questions regarding this presumed language command.

4.5.2. The ‘complaint tradition’ on the ever-receding level of Dutch language mastery among 18-year-old freshmen in Flanders is well-attested over the past decade. In 2008, Minister of Education Frank Vandenbroucke (2008) claimed that while “there is no scholarly basis to conclude whether incoming students underperform for Dutch language proficiency [...]”, a recent study conducted by three institutions of higher education in Brussels showed that “403 out of 1449 first year students [27.8%; W.V.] in the academic year 2006–2007 scored below average for an entry test on Dutch.”

A series of short-term longitudinal monitoring projects on freshers’ Dutch language proficiency initiated shortly after, confirmed this assessment. Lieve De Wachter and Jordi Heeren analysed the entry test results of more than 12000 students over an 8-year period (2010–2017) at the KU Leuven, concluding that on average 27.4% of all students obtained a score below 60%. They also found a correlation between study success and language proficiency, in the sense that 70% of that low-score group failed to pass half of their total exam package. Olaf Spittaels and Joke Vrijders confirmed this correlation in their data of more than 3300 students at the Artevelde university college in Gent: more than 65% of students with a low overall score for their total exam package did not pass the basic language proficiency test (i.e. scored below 50%). Following an analysis of 8200 students at Odisee university college (Brussels) from 2013 to 2017, An De Moor and Tom Colpaert reported in various news outlets in 2018 on a similar correlation and on an increasing decline of Dutch proficiency over time (despite an overall average score of 72.5% on the entry test) (Cajot et al. 2018).

Reviewing these data, Cajot et al. (2018) countered the complaint tradition and pointed out that the “academic language proficiency is not below average”, since the “majority of students scores above the risk threshold” [of 60%, W.V.]. They did highlight the necessity of a multifactorial analysis of the correlation between “Dutch proficiency”, “demographic and educational variables” and study success. All of the authors mentioned above equally foregrounded the students’ mother tongue (Dutch or not) as a key factor.
4.5.3. The Vrije Universiteit Brussel initiated an annual Dutch proficiency assessment of all new first year students in 2016, as an integrated component of both the ‘student welcome programme’ and the university’s language policy project. The results (a selection of which is presented here for the very first time to an international audience) are in line with the aforementioned data from other institutions of higher education, but offer additional insights into which specific language skills are at stake.

Over 6300 students were tested during the past 4 academic years (2016–17, 2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20), with overall average scores for the latter three years of respectively 73,7%, 70,1% and 71,2%. The share of students scoring below average (less than 60%) follows the Flemish trend discussed above (27,7% and 25,7% in 2018–19 and 2019–20, e.g.).

Dissecting the results for distinct language skills reveals substantial differences between the overall lower scores for comprehensive reading and basic language skills (with an average close to 65%), on the one hand, and the much better results for text structure and academic jargon (close to 80 percent on average).

Table 4: Intake test scores for language skills of first year students at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average score test 2017–18</th>
<th>Average score test 2018–19</th>
<th>Average score test 2019–20</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive reading</td>
<td>66,52%</td>
<td>65,54%</td>
<td>67,93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text structure</td>
<td>83,25%</td>
<td>82,70%</td>
<td>84,78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic vocabulary</td>
<td>74,33%</td>
<td>73,70%</td>
<td>73,91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic jargon</td>
<td>78,60%</td>
<td>79,61%</td>
<td>81,39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic language skills</td>
<td>65,95%</td>
<td>64,27%</td>
<td>63,83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73,73%</td>
<td>70,15%</td>
<td>71,21%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The effect of the mother tongue on the test results is equally apparent in the data, especially when split out according to these distinct language skills. This does not come as a surprise, given the highly diverse and multilingual character of Brussels (Janssens 2018). Half of the students indicate growing up in a monolingual Dutch

9 Data collected and analysed by project assistants Inge De Cleyn, Lauranne Harnie and Canigia Mestdagh, supervised by Barbara Louwagie and Wim Vandenbussche.
10 Note that the scores for the pilot test year are treated with caution, and that a number of potentially biasing test circumstances were adapted/eliminated from year two onwards.
11 Janssens’ (2018) 4th edition of the ‘language barometer’ mentions more than a 100 different ‘home languages’ being used in Brussels, making it the second most diverse town worldwide (second to Dubai).
home environment; the other half lists a different home language or mentions a ‘multilingual’ home setting.

It is manifestly clear that students with a Dutch home language background outperform their fellow students with a different linguistic profile. Further watersheds in the test results run between students from different faculties – with the Arts and the Natural Sciences faculties showing an average result of 76 %, as opposed to the faculty of Physical Education (68 %) – and different study programmes within the faculties.

5 Flemish versus French-speaking Community

In contrast to the elaborate efforts spent on data collection by the Flemish administration on the anglicisation of higher education, scraping up data on the situation in the French-speaking community of Belgium presents a serious challenge. The legal framework, for starters, is relatively spartan compared to the Flemish situation. The 2013 bill on higher education in the French-speaking community only stipulates that 25 % and 50 % of non-French courses are allowed in BA and MA programmes, respectively (Décret Paysage (2013), art. 72 § 2). There is no requirement whatsoever regarding English proficiency to enter these programmes, whereas foreign students do need to prove their mastery of French at a B2-level to start a bachelor’s degree (and at a C1-level to start a master’s degree preparing for the job of teacher) (Conseil 2015: 24–25).

While the highest advisory board of the French-speaking Community in Belgium on matters of language, the Conseil de la langue française et de la politique linguistique, did publish an elaborate and critical report in 2015 on the role of English in higher education, the same council remarked 4 years onwards – with understated and lethal iciness – that it “continued to reflect on the place of English in higher education and on the defeats posed by the absence of a policy on the topic”12 (Conseil 2019: 12).

There are – to date – no official reports on the number of foreign language programmes in the French-speaking community in Belgium. Marchal (2015) is a rare exception but presents data on the practice in the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL) only, as other universities failed to reply to her questionnaire. According to her data 9.8 % of all UCL master’s degrees were ‘Full English’ in 2014 (12 out of 122).

Yet, a website (www.mesetudes.be) on higher education opportunities powered by the French-speaking community and its federation of higher education institutions13, offers an overview of all programmes currently (i. e. 2020) offered across universities and university colleges, with the option to filter the data according to the

12 “Le Conseil a également poursuivi sa réflexion sur la place de l’anglais dans l’enseignement supérieur et sur les enjeux que pose l’absence de politique en la matière.”
13 L’Académie de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur (https://www.ares-ac.be; last access on 7 May 2020).
language of instruction. These figures testify to different dynamics at both sides of the language border.

The French-speaking community currently has 1287 bachelor programmes on offer, divided in 3 different types: 793 professional bachelors, 427 ‘transitional’ bachelors, and 67 specialised bachelors. A professional bachelor trains for direct access to the job market, whereas a transitional bachelor prepares for a master’s degree. Specialized bachelor programmes offer extra skills for those already in possession of a professional bachelor’s degree.

A mere 34 of these BA-programmes are offered in a language different from French (almost exclusively English), representing 2,6 % of all degrees (compare to the Flemish figure of 3,11 % in 2017–2018). This low figure requires nuance, however. Only 3 of the almost 800 professional bachelors are foreign language based, and all of the specialized bachelors are French programmes. Moreover, all of the ‘transitional’ bachelors organized by ‘higher institutions for the arts’ are French only (and make up close to half of this degree type). The anglophone (viz. ‘foreign language’) element is, accordingly, to be found exclusively in the share of transitional bachelors offered at universities and university colleges.

French speaking universities currently offer 195 initial bachelor programmes, 27 of which are English based (13,8 %). Of the 30 BA-degrees at university colleges, 3 are offered in English (10 %). It is clear, in other words, that universities and university colleges in the French-speaking community embrace the option of offering English-language ‘initial’ bachelors to a higher degree than their Flemish counterparts, helped by the absence of quota at the French-speaking side of the language border.

The 948 masters in the French-speaking community pertain to two types: regular (764) and specialized (184) MA programmes. Specialised masters are only open to students in possession of a regular MA degree. 165 of these 948 programmes are foreign language based, i.e. 17,4 % (compare to the Flemish figure of 23,63 % in 2017–2018). Similar caution is required, however, when interpreting these data. All masters offered by the ‘higher institutions for the arts’ (295) and the institutions for social promotion (8) are all French-only. Once again, the main anglicization can be traced down to the universities.

Out of 371 regular masters currently offered by universities in the French speaking community, 132 are conducted in English (and/or another language) (35,5 %). 21 of the 184 specialised masters (exclusively offered by universities) are non-French (11,4 %). For university colleges, the equation is 12 out of 90 (13,3 %).

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14 All data in this paragraph were collected from this website https://www.mesetudes.be; last access on 7 May 2020.
6 Discussion

The present edited volume testifies to the broad international impact of anglicization in higher education. Given the specific ‘ecology’ of each language in its different national, political and educational contexts, however, comparing the position of Dutch in Flanders to what happens abroad, is anything but straightforward. We already illustrated that the overall figures for Wallonia appear to indicate a lower impact of English, at first, whereas the specific data for university programmes actually show that Belgium’s French-speaking community is more ‘lenient’ toward anglicisation than its Dutch-speaking counterpart. As far as the ‘other’ part of the Dutch language territory is concerned, the Netherlands are commonly branded as having opened the floodgates for an overstretched dominance of English in universities. According to the most recent official figures available (KNAW 2017), 59% of all master programmes in the Netherlands are offered in English, 11% in either English or Dutch, and 30% in Dutch. For BA-programmes, the percentages are 20, 10, and 70. When assessing the situation of other medium-sized languages (Vila/Bretxa 2015), Flanders also appears as a region that is more protective of its mother tongue in higher education than others. There is some truth in Vila’s (2015: 5) observation that “it is precisely among some of the medium-sized languages with an older and stronger position in higher universities, like the Nordic languages and Dutch [in the Netherlands, W.V.], that the process of the anglicisation of higher education is apparently making more inroads.”

What distinguishes the Flemish policy in the international context is its legal restriction of the number of foreign-language taught programmes to a relatively low maximum. In case of conflict between supply and demand on the educational market, this allows Flemish legislators and institutions of higher education to negotiate modest increases (cf. the recently changed 9% threshold for BA-programmes). Honesty bids to underscore that a further raise of these restrictions in Flanders are not the order of the day – for now. Both the clear ‘capping’ by law and the cultivation of a recently-won language struggle in the broader intellectual community in Flanders, puts university leaders in a position of great caution whenever championing looser language regulations.

No matter how pervasive legal and sociohistorical arguments may have been in this debate, so far, it is clear that financial concerns may inflict an equally powerful pressure on policy makers in the near future. Flemish universities have been competing over a closed budget for many years now, requiring massive efforts for a modest financial bonus at the cost of another institution. Parameters for financial growth – student recruitment and research output – are currently already pursued to the extreme. Flemish universities are tempted and eager to target an untapped resource of income, i.e. the substantial (and higher-fee-paying) audience of international young adults in Belgium, but are unable to do so due to their limited offer of English-taught programmes. Under European legislation, foreign institutions are allowed to offer those programmes in Flanders with a foreign accreditation, however, literally on the
doorstep of neighbouring Flemish universities. As long as the basic governmental funding of universities does not increase, this situation is bound to trigger continued demands for ‘looser’ language regulations, also among those who fervently believe that education should not be treated as a commodity. Pro-Dutch lobbyists may therefore want to add a plea for increased basic university funding to their heartfelt educational, historical and social arguments.

Whatever the outcome of the language policy dynamics may be in Flanders, institutions of higher education will need to extend and perpetuate their investment in a language policy of their own. Many universities and university colleges are doing so already, tailor-made to their own audience, and fora for the exchange of best practices testify to a vibrant activity in this domain. While it is evident that the defeats of internationalisation call for a focus on the English language proficiency of professors and students alike, providing support for the mastery of the dominant language of instruction (in our case Dutch) is equally vital. Given the results reported above of the intake tests for Dutch language mastery, and considering the relatively minor overall impact of English on university curricula in Flanders, one might even argue that this support for Dutch deserves some priority. Building a strong language policy for English-language programmes on a solid base of Dutch language proficiency and training, may be the wisest approach for success in the globalised academic world.

7 References


15 The ‘Flemish forum for language policy in higher education’ is an important player in the field: https://www.forumtaalbeleidhogeronderwijs.be; last access on 7 May 2020. There also is a ‘Flemish/Dutch platform for language policy in higher education’: https://www.taalbeleidhogeronderwijs.org; last access on 7 May 2020.


