



UNUSUAL
SUSPECTS
IN INTERNATIONALISATION

Internationalisation is often thought to belong to the realm of universities, but do opportunities for building intercultural competence have to be so limited? In the Netherlands, unexpected internationalisation of ‘unusual suspects’ – from primary school classrooms to digital platforms – highlights both the need and the potential for a more holistic approach to internationalisation.

In a 2014 letter to parliament on the topic of internationalisation of higher education, the Dutch Minister of Education stated that students should be trained as what she called “competent rebels”: thinkers and doers who are able to promote change through a combination of creativity, courage and ambition. More recently, the Ministry followed up by emphasising that education sectors – from vocational schools to primary education – should better learn from each other’s best practices, including the achievements of secondary schools in the field of bilingual education.

Internationalisation is not just for higher education, and not just for students who are able to study abroad: as our society becomes more international, the focus is shifting away from the ‘usual suspects’ such as research universities and universities of applied sciences, to a more holistic embrace of the education system as a whole as a cultivator of inter-culturally competent rebels.

EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

No fewer than one in five primary schools in the Netherlands – about 1400 schools – offer up to 15% of teaching time (3.5 hours per week) in English, French or German. This *vroeg vreemdetalenonderwijs*, or early foreign language learning, started in the 1990s and has since become increasingly popular. Of these schools, 90% offer only English, while the other 10% also offer German or French. These foreign languages are also applied and integrated in daily activities or in subjects such as music, physical education, geography and history.

There has been some concern about the potential negative consequences of early foreign language learning for the students themselves. Does the use of foreign languages not hinder the development of their native language skills? However, research funded by the Dutch government shows that teaching in a foreign language does not impair students’ learning of Dutch.¹ The students at these early foreign language schools sometimes even achieve slightly better scores in Dutch tests than students of other schools.

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BILINGUAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

Likewise at the level of secondary and vocational education more and more schools offer bilingual education. Bilingual education has two goals: fluent and adequate command of a second language and broadening cultural horizons for personal development, which is emphasised in the curriculum of the schools.

Research by Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education, shows that bilingual education gives students more confidence for their further education.² More than 37,000 students take at

least half of their classes in English at 130 secondary schools across the Netherlands. Whereas 81.4% of graduates of bilingual education programmes do not expect problems with language in their future studies, a substantially lower 57.9% of students who did not follow bilingual education share their confidence. Additionally, students of bilingual education have more plans to go abroad for their studies than students at non-bilingual secondary schools.

into the classroom: for example, students can learn how to bake bread like they do in France, by exchanging knowledge online with their peers in France.

One of the programmes that facilitates international experience for home students is eTwinning, an online community for primary, secondary and vocational education through which teachers and students can collaborate with their peers and colleagues in more than 30 European countries. This kind of digital collabo-

and secondary school classrooms to the office of the Minister of Education. Yet, rather unexpectedly, there is still no continuity in internationalisation across the various levels of schooling: vocational schools are not aware of internationalisation initiatives at secondary schools, and in turn, secondary schools are not always attuned to primary schools' internationalisation curriculum.

Led by Nuffic, the 'Internationalisation for all' initiative works towards fostering cross-sectoral continuity in language development and global competence. The project aims to achieve concrete goals, such as instating a continuous learning trajectory for studying English and amending laws and regulations that hinder the continuity of curriculum between education sectors.

Alongside the successful initiatives within each level of the Dutch education system, 'Internationalisation for all' aims to ensure that internationalisation in the Netherlands isn't limited to the usual suspects. By equipping all students in each sector of the education system with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes, we can rise to the call of cultivating competent rebels who can live, study and work in our global society, and ultimately change it for the better.

— PIETER VERBEEK & EVELINE VAN ENGELEN

Internationalisation is for every student – also for those who never cross a national border

INTERNATIONALISATION AT HOME AND VET

Vocational education and training (VET) is preparing for a globalising international labour market and intercultural society. In shops, cafés and companies, employees need skills to give service to a growing number of international customers. It is important that students develop intercultural awareness, so that they understand that something that is common to Dutch people may be experienced very differently by someone with another cultural background. It also helps them if they choose to continue their studies in higher education.

Internationalisation is for every student – also for those who never cross a national border. Going abroad on a work placement is one form of internationalisation, but there are many more ways to bring vocational education students into contact with other countries and cultures. Digital forms of education can help bring an international dimension

into the classroom. This kind of digital collaboration offers home students their own international experience and helps them develop their professional and foreign language skills. With eTwinning, students at all levels of education look across the border and actively build up their intercultural competences without ever leaving the classroom.

The fact that not all students currently have the same opportunities to study abroad is partly due to socioeconomic factors: children of highly educated and wealthier parents often have more opportunities. Focusing on internationalisation at home is one way to offer international experiences to greater numbers of students, producing more opportunities for all and cultivating a better-educated workforce of even more competent rebels.

INTERNATIONALISATION FOR ALL

So we have seen that internationalisation is high on the agenda in every layer of the Dutch education system, from primary

1. www.nuffic.nl/documents/577/evaluatie-pilot-tweetalig-primair-onderwijs-vervolgmeting.pdf

2. www.nuffic.nl/documents/298/tweetalig-onderwijs-in-het-voortgezet-onderwijs.pdf