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## **Opening address on behalf of the Representation of the Flemish government in the Netherlands**

### **Abstract (Dutch)**

Het is een eer om de EFNIL-conferentie in te luiden. U bevindt zich niet alleen in het cultuurhuis ‘De Brakke Grond’, dat onderdeel uitmaakt van de officiële vertegenwoordiging van Vlaanderen in Nederland. Maar de conferentie is ook voorbereid door de Nederlandse Taalunie en door het Instituut voor de Nederlands Taal – twee instellingen die van uitzonderlijk belang zijn voor de uitbouw van een taalstrategie voor het Nederlands – de taal die wij delen met Nederland en met Suriname. Wat ons momenteel erg bezig houdt is de positie van het Nederlands in het hoger onderwijs. In Nederland is de verengelsing al ver gevorderd. In Vlaanderen pogen wij een evenwicht uit te bouwen. Uiteraard is de Engelse taal de huidige lingua franca. Maar dat mag ons niet doen vergeten dat ons hoger onderwijs een belangrijk emancipatorisch karakter heeft, en dat het gros van de afgestudeerden zich in hun loopbaan vooral van de taal van de eigen gemeenschap – het Nederlands – zal moeten bedienen. Een al te exclusieve gerichtheid op het Engels verhindert overigens ook de nodige aandacht voor andere talen met een internationale uitstraling.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear members of the EFNIL family,

on behalf of the government of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking autonomous region of Belgium, I would like to warmly welcome you to this EFNIL conference. It is not my task, as a diplomat, to take on the subject of the discussions and talks you are going to have after the introductory remarks. What I would like to stress, however, is the importance the government of Flanders attaches to the absolute necessity of developing an effective language strategy. This conference is not only taking place in the Flemish Cultural Centre in Amsterdam, which is part of the larger official representation of Flanders in the Netherlands. This 16<sup>th</sup> annual EFNIL conference is also being hosted by the two most important organisations responsible for shaping a strategy for the language that we Flemings share with the Dutch and the people of Surinam, the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (the Union for the Dutch Language), with its seat in The Hague, and the *INT* (the Dutch Language Institute), based in Leiden.

Over the last eight years or so, the very close official strategic cooperation between Flanders and the kingdom of the Netherlands has been modelled on a biannual cycle of governmental summits and an intermediate midterm review by top civil servants from both countries. The next summit is going to take place on 5<sup>th</sup> November, in the capital city of the Dutch province of Zeeland, Middelburg.

The use of Dutch at an academic level will figure on the agenda of the ministers of Education. In most Dutch universities and other institutions of higher education, Dutch has been replaced by English, to a significant extent, and the language is also very common in Master's degree courses at Flemish universities. Of course, nobody is questioning the fact that English is the *lingua franca* of our time. But what is worrying Flemish politicians – and a growing number of Dutch academics even more so – is the predominance of English in Bachelor's programmes. Not to forget the exclusive position of English at the expense of other important languages like French or German, Spanish, Russian, Italian ...

Most of you are aware of the long history of the linguistic struggle that Belgium has endured. A Belgian state was established in 1830 by the elite if that day and age as a unilingual 'Latin' state, the Dutch dialects of the majority of its citizens being regarded as a kind of folklore, useful only to distinguish the former Southern Netherlands from France proper. Looking back, it can be considered a miracle that Dutch has survived at all and is nowadays flourishing in Belgium. Our first Dutch language university only dates back to 1930, and I myself was – as is the case with most of my generation – the first one in my extended family who could go to university at all, and that in my mother tongue. In the late 1970's, this very fact was regarded as being a triumph of social emancipation and upwards mobility. Democracy in educational matters reinvented, so to speak.

Fast forward to 2018 and part of our intelligentsia has forgotten this history. English, and English alone, is offering the path to academic recognition, is their mantra. Forgone the idea that a university should be universal – of course – but also embedded within the society that is paying for it and counting on its contribution. Luckily, most of our Flemish politicians are watchful. Under the prevailing laws in Flanders, only a maximum of 6 percent of bachelor courses can be taught in a language other than Dutch and, likewise, a maximum of 35 percent of master courses. And for every English-medium programme, a Dutch one must be provided as well. Going one step further. Flemish universities – that are regarded, moreover, as being amongst the best in Europe – are attracting professors from all over the globe. But those academics commit to speaking Dutch fluently – at B2 level – within five years of being engaged.

As a diplomat, I don't have to lecture the Dutch on how to speak properly. I do understand why quite a lot of them do not have the kind of sensitivity history has saddled us Flemings with. But what I do see is the emergence, in the Netherlands, of a broad resistance against a complete and utter Anglicisation of higher education, out of purely ideological or merely profit-seeking goals, filling the coffers of the educational institutions with untampered tuition fees, paid by students from – by preference – non-EU countries. The same kind of reasoning is knocking at the doors of Flemish universities. But we do have to resist. Internationalisation is fine, is necessary. Long live Erasmus and his European exchange programmes. And the use of English can and should be the lubricant with which to enhance and promote

student mobility. But not at the expense of the role that our institutions of higher education have to play within the society that pays for them, that counts on them. Some of our graduates will become academics, using, in the first place, English as their main tool of global communication. But most of them are going to find their vocation as teachers, lawyers, doctors, civil servants, entrepreneurs. They will be acting in a globalised world but they will certainly also work within a community that will continue to use its common language as its prime means of expression and communication. Let us be fully aware of the social and political roles our institutions of higher education play and will continue to play in the future. Let us resist their complete Anglicisation. Not because we are against Europeanisation or globalisation but because we want to resist this blind rush, the hype. And we do want a positive approach to internationalisation, with regard to the real interests of the communities we want to serve. *E pluribus unum*, yes. But let us not forget our pluritude.

### **Bibliographical information**

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