

LOW COUNTRIES STUDIES IN THE NINETIES

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A presentation with the above title was given at the 60th anniversary meeting of the Conference of University Teachers of German in Great Britain and Ireland held at the University of Bath from 13 to 16 April 1992. It presented an overview of current activities in the field of Dutch Studies in the UK and Ireland, and in addition aimed to inform colleagues who might be thinking of diversifying. The areas covered included teaching materials, institutions like the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*) and scholarship scheme whereby Dutch students of English on a year abroad are paid a moderate sum by the *Nederlandse Taalunie* to help teach language classes in those universities where Dutch is taught.

In order to obtain the most up-to-date statistical information, a questionnaire was sent out early in the Spring Term, asking for information on student numbers over the three academic years 1989-90 to 1991-92. By a stroke of luck some comparative material was available, because a similar exercise was undertaken in 1986. The data collected on that occasion were requested by the then UGC for its subject review of Dutch Studies. Some of the information from 1986 was irrelevant for this exercise, but not the statistics on student numbers.

In 1986 fourteen institutions took part. They were the ones listed under 'United Kingdom' in the directory of the *Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek* (International Association for Dutch Studies). For the 1992 questionnaire all German Departments on the mailing list of the Institute of Germanic Studies¹ were contacted. Of these, 47 replied, 20 of them confirming that they did teach Dutch².

Dutch is taught at least as a beginners' option at all the 20 institutions. Table 1 gives an overview of the status of Dutch in all participating institutions.

Table 1

category		status of Dutch		no. of institutions
a.	single honours			2
b.	joint honours:	equal		3
		major		3
		minor		4
c.	combined languages			5
d.	beginners' option			20
e.	intermediate/advanced			10

In some institutions Dutch is taught at postgraduate level or as an option in combined arts. In addition to language courses, some universities teach non-language units (history, culture and civilization, geography), and a few offer a two-year subsidiary language course. In other words, a wide variety of teaching modes exists to suit the departments and no doubt the students in question.

The students' origin is more interesting than six or seven years ago, when most students taking Dutch alongside their main subject were language students. Students' home departments listed in the 1992 returns were:

agriculture	Arabic	archaeology
art	biology	business
chemistry	commerce	engineering
European Studies	English	geography
history	history of art	linguistics
modern languages	pharmacology	politics
psychology	science	Indonesian
theology		

The student numbers are given in Table 2. The most interesting category here is **d. beginners' option**, where the numbers virtually doubled in one year from 89-90 to 90-91. This is sustained in the following year, when in addition category **e. intermediate/advanced option** shows a similar jump of nearly 100%. Another category which shows growth, albeit at a

much less dramatic rate, is **b. joint honours**. At the same time the numbers for single honours students remain fairly constant.

An explanation for this growth can probably be found in the fact that in the course of 1990 the Single European Act and its consequences for trade were given much attention in the media. This brought with it an increased awareness of the need for foreign language skills in Britain, not only in French and German (traditionally regarded as the main foreign languages), but also in less widely spoken languages. So in order to be more employable, students have been opting to expand their linguistic skills into these so-called 'smaller' languages³. This may also provide an explanation for the relative stability of the number of single honours students, because having advanced linguistic skills in just one 'smaller' language is not necessarily an advantage on the labour market. It is the combination that counts. Moreover, this category is of course strictly controlled by university entrance regulations. This particular statistic may, therefore, be relatively insignificant, since in this case it is the number of applications rather than the number of places available that is indicative of the requirements of applicants. But unfortunately, UCCA statistics have not been included in this survey.

Table 2

Student numbers in Dutch 89-90, 90-91 and 91-92

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 abroad	Year 4	Total
a. single honours					
89-90	8	9	10	11	<u>38</u>
90-91	10	8	8	10	<u>36</u>
91-92	15	10	8	8	<u>41</u>

b. joint honours

89-90	15	18	9	17	<u>59</u>
90-91	21	14	14	8	<u>57</u>
91-92	21	21	11	13	<u>66</u>

c. combined languages

89-90	12	4			<u>16</u>
90-91	11	6	2		<u>19</u>
91-92	7	5			<u>12</u>

d. beginners' option

89-90	114
90-91	217
91-92	222

e. intermediate/advanced option

89-90	31
90-91	47
91-92	84

f. other

89-90	21
90-91	27
91-92	29

The 1986 survey was not as sophisticated as that carried out in 1992; it merely differentiated between single, joint and option students. Like the 1992 survey it looked at student numbers over a period of three academic years. Its findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

	1986 survey			
	single	joint	option	total
83-84	36	41	158	235
84-85	37	43	158	238
85-86	46	34	141	221

Most interesting is of course a comparison between the two surveys. This is shown in Tables 4 and 5, which also show the rate of growth in the three years covered in the 1992 survey. Table 4 deals with the total number of students, i.e. all categories a-f in Table 2. Column 2 shows the total number of students in each of the three years surveyed. Column 3 gives this as a percentage of the base year, 1989-90, and column 4 as a percentage of the last year in the 1986 survey, 1985-86, when the total number of students doing Dutch as part of their degree was 221.

In Table 5 the same data are given for just the option students (i.e. categories d and e in Table 2). Column 2 shows the total number of students taking Dutch as an option in the three years surveyed in 1992; column 3 the percentage value with 1989-90 as the base year; and column 4 the percentage value with 1985-86 as the base, when the number of students taking Dutch as an option was 141.

The figures in column 4 of Tables 4 and 5 are given in brackets, because care must be taken when comparing the data from the two surveys. They were collected under different circumstances and for different purposes, and different questions were asked. Nevertheless, a certain degree of comparability is possible.

Table 4

Percentages on total student numbers

	total	% 89	(% 86)
89-90	279	100	(126.24)
90-91	403	144.44	(182.35)
91-92	425	152.33	(192.31)

Table 5

Percentages on total number of option students

	total	% 89	(% 86)
89-90	145	100	(102.84)
90-91	264	182.07	(187.23)
91-92	306	211.03	(217.02)

What these data ultimately show, is that growth in student numbers in Dutch has been quite dramatic in the past two years, particularly for those who take Dutch as an option within another degree. Whether this trend will continue remains to be seen of course. A new survey should be carried out in 1998 at the latest.

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NOTES

1. Whose help is hereby greatly acknowledged.
2. In fact, three institutions that did take part in 1986 chose not to reply in 1992; it is known that Dutch is still taught at two of these, but numbers are not available.
3. Comparatively speaking, Dutch (with over 20 million speakers) is of course a relatively big language.