

Management Policy and Employee Practice at the International University

Hanne Tange, Associate professor
Aalborg University

These are interesting times in Danish higher education. Within the last decade, a ‘war of words’ has evolved between, on the one hand, the supporters of Danish who believe that universities have to accept their responsibility for the maintenance and continuous development of the national language, and, on the other, internationalists favouring the wider use of English as a medium of instruction and research. To a large extent this debate between university managers, policy-makers, journalists and key stakeholders such as student representatives, trade unions or industry may be characterised as ideological. Yet it has very real implications for the everyday practices of a growing number of students and academic staff.

Using Bourdieu’s economic approach to language as the focal point, I shall address in my presentation the dilemmas arising from the co-existence of a global, English and a national, Danish discourse within the field of higher education in Denmark. The first part shows how the emergence of a global knowledge market has prompted Danish university managers to develop new policies on language, promoting the idea of ‘parallel language usage’ in an attempt to justify to staff and students the ongoing normalisation of English within the areas of research and teaching. The second part looks at the question of English domination from the position of the university lecturers. Drawing on qualitative research interviews collected at five Danish faculties, the analysis demonstrates how ‘English-only’ strategies have affected teachers’ practice and how they have responded by developing idiosyncratic rules deriving from local needs rather than global principles. The paper concludes that there seems to be resistance to the spread of English within the Danish university system but also that such conduct tends to be hidden rather than explicit.