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# English as a medium of instruction and internationalization at Danish universities

*Status, perspectives, and implications for higher education executives*

Klarissa Lueg

Assistant Professor, Dr. phil.

*Department of Business Communication, Aarhus University*

## Abstract

*This paper discusses possible policies to handle English as a medium of instruction for higher education (HE) in Denmark. It summarizes the de-facto status of the institutionalization of English as a lingua franca and EMI in Europe and relates the findings to the status quo of the academic and political discussion about EMI in Denmark. This discussion is classified into three typical approaches: the progressive, the conservative, and the radical conservative. The distinction is supplemented with the results of the author's own recent study on EMI and the introduction of a fourth perspective: the 'cautiously progressive perspective'. This perspective supports further introduction of EMI, on condition that careful attention must be given to the way EMI is implemented. Possible lines of reactions, implications, and recommendations are introduced. These are relevant for university teachers that wish to encourage their students to participate in EMI classes and for university management and administration in order to provide the necessary conditions for a reasonable EMI use. They could further provide value for potential employers that support EMI education, especially in the field of communication.*

## The Ascent of English as a medium of instruction in Europe

The steadily advancing Bologna process in Europe (Powell & Solga, 2010) gives witness to a general European tendency in education politics and management to follow internationalization strategies. The internationalization process, on the one hand, and the increasing importance of English as the European lingua franca and language of higher education, on the other hand, are strongly interrelated. This development widely impacts areas of research and publishing, but the most visible effect of English as a lingua franca is probably its implementation as a medium of instruction (EMI) in university lectures and seminars. In parallel to the globally increasing presence of EMI in higher education (HE), surveys across Europe show the efforts of HE institutions toward increasing their EMI programs in non-English-speaking countries (Ammon & McConnell, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Costa & Coleman, 2012; Maiworm & Wächter, 2002). According to the survey of Wächter and Maiworm (2008), EMI programs on the Bachelor's and Master's level tripled within five years. Implementing universities are usually located in North-East Europe, to a lesser degree in the South. However, even in countries such as Denmark with a high level of English proficiency and numerous EMI programs, EMI keeps sparking debates amongst university staff, politicians and in the media. An outstanding example for such controversial discussions about EMI, in Europe, is to be found in Italy: over 100 faculty members went to court to reverse the process of introducing EMI programs at Milan Polytechnic. The regional administrative court ruled in favor of their point of view (Severgnini, 2015). In Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, EMI seems to be slowly but steadily on the rise (Coleman, 2006). Whilst proponents point to the benefits of EMI for, amongst other things, content learning and graduate employability, opponents bring up arguments varying from being victimized by cultural imperialism to educational elitism. Both recent research results and public opinions will be presented in the present paper. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the implications of the intensified EMI use for HE practitioners in Denmark. It is intended to present, and comment on, recent insights into the above mentioned research, under consideration and in connection with relevant strands of public opinion.

The following section 2 gives an overview of the status of English and EMI in Denmark. This overview is the basis for the introduction of the ‘four perspectives’ in research and the public debate on EMI. Perspectives and debate are then explored in section 3. One of the perspectives, the ‘cautiously progressive perspective’ is largely derived from this author’s research on EMI, which will briefly be documented. Finally, in section 4, there will be a discussion of implications inherent in arguments and perspectives as presented in previous sections.

## **The status of English and of English as a medium of instruction in Denmark**

With a population of around 5.5 million, Denmark is nearly exclusively a monolingual country with Danish as the official language. Yet, English plays a comparatively important role. In order to assess the status of English and EMI in Denmark, this study presents data and literature relating to the fields of factual English knowledge, the economic importance of English, and English in HE.

Even though bilingualism exists in Denmark (the German-Danish border region; Faroese, German and Greenlandic are recognized regional languages), Denmark is one of the most language-homogeneous countries in the EU: 97% of the Danes name Danish their mother tongue. Only 2% indicate other official EU languages, and 2% specify further languages. Only Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland and Portugal are similarly or more homogeneous. Yet, 30% of Danes claim an ability to have a conversation in at least three languages, excluding their mother tongue. Amongst all European countries, Denmark stands out in terms of multilingualism, and particularly in English proficiency. 86% of all Danes assess their English proficiency as being high enough to have a conversation (European Commission 2006). In the latest EF English proficiency index, Denmark is ranked no. 1 of 63 countries (EF\_EPI, 2014). Educational Testing Service (2011) shows that Danish test respondents rank second among 165 countries in the TOEFL tests of English. The consumption of cultural products seems to be preferred in the original language of the product when given the choice: 94% of all Danes prefer to hear the original language of movies accompanied by sub-titles in Danish (Commission, 2006).

When it comes to the importance of English for economy and the job market, Danish companies are highly internationalized (Knight, Madsen, & Servais, 2004; Moen & Servais, 2002; Pedersen, 2000; Servais & Jensen, 2001). Denmark's relatively small domestic market makes English as corporate language in international transactions a near-necessity (Firth, 1996). For communication practitioners it is highly relevant to note Danish employers emphasizing English as being needed at the workplace (Going Global, 2006; Sørensen, 2005; Tange, 2008; Tange & Luring, 2009). Addressing the importance of English in Higher Education, approximately 25% of all Danish university programs were offered in English as of 2007 (198 of 810). Presently, the Danish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education (2012) lists 145 M.A. and 60 B.A. programs with EMI at Danish universities. Aarhus University (AU) offers 65 degree programs completely in English (AU, 2012). Within these, 509 out of 1885 individual courses are held in English during the fall term of 2012 (AU, 2012b). The University of Copenhagen (KU) offers 170 EMI classes (out of 406), in the social science faculty alone, in fall term 2013/14 (KU, 2013). In its internationalization strategy, AU states that its aim is to “[...] *increase the number of subjects offered in English*” (AU, 2012b, p.5). In line with this policy, the Centre for Teaching and Learning at AU offers courses such as “Teaching in English in the Multicultural Classroom” for staff members, and such courses, it seems, are meant to reduce EMI-skepticism (“ensure the quality of teaching”, “avoid an ‘us-and-them’ culture”, Lauridsen, 2013). Similar classes for lecturers are offered at Aalborg University (LACS, 2013), to name just one more HE institution. A piece of prominent evidence for the increasing market for fluent-English lecturers is the ‘English language certification’ offered by the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use at University of Copenhagen (CIP, 2013b).

## **Four perspectives on English as a medium of instruction**

In this section, four typical perspectives on EMI and accompanying arguments and references extracted from the literature review will be introduced (for a similar discussion of EMI related perspectives in Germany, s. Lueg, 2015). This, it is suggested here, implies that sorting arguments along the chosen four perspectives refers

to the Weberian “ideal type” and is based on subjective judgment and selection. A methodological construct is created, and presented, which does not necessarily reflect reality (Kim, 2012). The classification procedure, as adopted here, mirrors prevailing clusters of arguments. In addition, this classification procedure is meant to serve, not only the structural stability, but also the comprehensibility, of this paper. Numerous arguments, from many different perspectives, can often be found, in articles or political debates, side by side. The last perspective introduced – the ‘cautiously progressive perspective’ – is mainly generated from own recent research on EMI in Denmark. It is emphasized here that many different perspectives and arguments must be considered in order to tackle, and put into practice, a satisfactory policy of HE management in Denmark.

### **The progressive perspective: English as a necessity in a globalizing economy**

The first perspective addressed in this paper is labeled the ‘progressive perspective’, because it is usually found in a cluster with arguments that support generic or further introduction of EMI. Two important strands of this argumentative cluster are linguistic pragmatism and economic reason: Studies show that English proficiency is indeed needed at workplaces in Europe (Taillefer, 2007; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Säntti, 2005) and managers are expected to be proficient in English (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005). Within the EU, conducting business transactions in English has become standard practice (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). Increasing European internationalization and the subsequent “*near-necessity of English proficiency for graduate employability*” (Costa & Coleman, 2012: 2) lead HE institutions to adapt more and more EMI courses and full programs. As further studies show, students seem to respond to the changes in the political and cultural landscape by considering EMI as a career prerequisite and an advantage on the job market (Byun et al., 2011; Gardner, 1985). In addition, studies from non-European contexts show perceived advantages on the job market being a main reason for students’ choice of EMI (Byun et al., 2011; Diab, 2006; Tung, Lam, & Tsang, 1997; Yang & Lau, 2003). Following this job-market oriented logic, English proficiency is a source of self-esteem for students and young graduates (Andrade, 2009; Ball & Chik, 2001; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2001). Yet, this part of the ‘progressive perspective’ goes beyond the economic argumentation and now

includes cultural, sociological and psychological considerations: a person's self-esteem is often rooted in possessing the characteristics that a society considers desirable ("symbolic capital", Bourdieu, 2005). As Prieur and Savage (2011) demonstrate for the case of Denmark, an "*international orientation*" is associated with cultural privileges, a higher level of education, and social recognition. Consequently, the ability to prove such international orientation by an EMI education may not only contribute to better job market chances in an international, but also in a domestic perspective (Prieur & Savage, 2011: 567), and the resulting recognition and self-consciousness may make way for social upscaling. Further arguments have to be considered, such as a better condition for international exchange, the consequential potential for broadening the students' horizons, and higher degrees of attractiveness of the HE institution for incoming international students. To conclude, the progressive perspective is mainly to be found in academic articles and empirical studies, or in official documents of HE institutions.

### **The conservative perspective: English influences have to be balanced and controlled**

Despite the evidence of a considerable Danish pro-EMI sentiment, as outlined above, EMI and English as a European lingua franca is a controversial topic in Denmark. For instance, politicians have proposed to protect local languages and culture against English as a European lingua franca (Kulturministeriet, 2003). The conservative perspective pronounces the importance of protecting a country's mother tongue. Just like the progressive perspective, the conservative perspective contains a pragmatic component. This pragmatism relates, in the first place, not to the overarching realities of a developing international market, but to the concrete didactics in HE institutions. Some authors argue that content learning in English will be negatively affected (Christensen, 2009; Gottlieb, 2009). They suspect that trying to follow a subject in a foreign language could be at the expense of the students' comprehension, participation, and exam performance. No such effects have to date been proven by studies. By the same token, however, a possible perception of such problems by students has to be taken into consideration. Students may worry about receiving lower grades and refrain from choosing EMI (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Christensen, 2009). Indeed, studies show that insecurity and perceived obstacles in general lead to higher drop-out rates or avoidance

behavior (Araque, Roldán, & Salguero, 2009; Belloc, Maruotti, & Petrella, 2010; Bennett, 2003; Lassibille & Navarro Gómez, 2008). This argument is reflected on in the ‘cautiously progressive perspective’. Recently, Danish media have given attention to researchers voicing that the focus on English by educational institutions in Denmark has been too one-sided (Mortensen, 2013). Yet, the conservative perspective must be understood as mainly trying to protect the domestic language. A governmental committee in Denmark pragmatically admits that “*English has become the most dominant influencing language*” (Sprogudvalget, 2008, own translation, p.11), but the committee nevertheless investigated how the Danish language can be strengthened in educational contexts.

### **The radical conservative perspective: English as a threat to Danish values and traditions**

This perspective is focused far more on a perceived threat, an imperialistic character, of the English language than the ‘conservative perspective’. In Europe, the ‘radical conservative perspective’ is often represented by right-wing political parties. In Denmark, Dansk Folkeparti (2009) calls for an outright predominance of Danish as a medium of instruction teaching and wants further research mediation to be facilitated primarily in Danish. The resistance to EMI at Danish Universities is made clear by a Dansk Folkeparti representative in a newspaper interview: “*Det afgørende for os er, at der ikke bliver undervist på engelsk, men på dansk [...]*.” (“*What is crucial for us is that teaching is not in English, but in Danish*”)<sup>1</sup> (Sørensen, 2013). However, this debate is first and foremost carried out in the media and on the level of party politics and less in academic journal articles. Even the media debate is kept within a limit: over the last 12 months the Danish media archive infomedia.dk (Infomedia, 2013) (09.12.2012-09.12.2013) only shows few newspaper articles on the subject of EMI at Danish universities that can be aligned with the radical conservative view – all connected to Dansk Folkeparti. Resistance to EMI is often associated with a fear of Anglo-American influences in general (Jeong, 2004; Kang, 2012; Park, 2009; Seth, 2002) and it is also linked, in some cases, to an internationalization and immigration debate. It is thus no

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the original Danish are layman translations by the author.



surprise that Dansk Folkeparti (2009) addresses the issue of “*udenlandske studerende*”/“*foreign students*”, in a context of warning that “*den danske stemme i det internationale kor vil hermed forstumme.*” (“*the Danish voice in the international choir will be silenced.*”). Critics fear a “*domain loss*” of the domestic language, but also a split between an English-competent elite and a locally-oriented majority (for a discussion s. Preisler, 2009). Partisanship for the ‘man on the street’ is used, in exemplary fashion, by Dansk Folkeparti. Practical implications of this perspective are neither contemporary nor could they stand a reality test (Eliminating all foreign words would leave the Danish language with 4,000-5,000 words, Sørensen, 2013). Still, fears and perceived threats have to be taken into account when discussing a reasonable implementation of EMI.

### **The cautiously progressive perspective**

This perspective has been given this name because it generally supports the further introduction of EMI, whilst at the same time emphasizing cautiousness as to the diversity within the student body. Research data supporting this cautiously progressive perspective, are mainly drawn from Lueg & Lueg’s (2015) recent study on EMI. It focuses on the issue of maintaining equal chances when introducing EMI. The progressive perspective tends to overlook the within-field-differentiation of the Danish student body, e.g. as to family background and gender. In order to probe student diversity and its impact on EMI-related choice making Lueg and Lueg surveyed 616 first semester students in the Bachelor of Science in Economics and Business Administration at AU in fall 2011. As students can choose between Danish and English as a medium of instruction, conditions for a comparison were ideal. Data were collected using a questionnaire. It was analyzed by way of structural equation modelling. This approach enabled the authors to discover hidden and indirect relations between constructs measured by the questionnaire.

#### *Results:*

Analysis of research data shows that students decide against EMI because they believe that the English language will hinder them to achieve their study goals. This result resembles the argument found in the conservative perspective: students might be threatened by the foreign language. The survey explicitly shows that students deciding

against EMI fear receiving lower grades or missing content. Crucial for the analysis was the division of students along the educational and professional background of their parents, i.e. their social background. In line with recent European stratification and education studies (Isserstedt, Middendorf, Kandulla, Borchert, & Leszczensky, 2010; Orr, Gwosd, & Netz, 2011), students were assigned to four social background categories (1 = lower middle, 2 = middle, 3 = upper middle, and 4 = high). EMI poses a threat especially for students from the lower strata: they tend to overestimate the barriers introduced by EMI. Even the lower strata students who estimate the importance of English for the job market to be high do not choose EMI. It is concluded that barriers and fears of failure cause the self-selection against EMI. The actual English proficiency of all students in both DMI and EMI program should be equal, since secondary school English is a prerequisite for registration. Students have to document English proficiency (B in secondary school English).

The study thus shows, different from assumptions informing the conservative perspective, that EMI itself is not the threat, the perception and assessment of EMI is. Students from a higher social background clearly tend to perceive their language proficiency as much higher than students from lower strata. Students' program choices do not reflect their de-facto capabilities, but rather different kinds of self-esteem as to language in the university surroundings.

*Opportunities and challenges:*

The study results presented above raise some concerns about how EMI is currently implemented and embedded in the Danish HE system. The main focus of this perspective is on promoting EMI, whilst demanding conditional improvements in management and didactics to prevent disadvantages. Thus, it is of relevance for practitioners and executives in the HE sector, but also for company representatives that wish to recruit graduates from EMI programs. The outlined results are opportunity and challenge at once for professionals in the HE sector and for Danish employers: On the one hand they show that EMI is not per se a discriminatory factor. On the other hand, since the English language has gained such high importance for the job market and also functions as a cultural marker ("*legitimate language*", Bourdieu, 1991, 49), it should be taken into account that this division of a student cohort might foster reproduction of unequal chances in society. Companies might lose potentially talented and resourceful

employees, due to self-selection vis-à-vis EMI. The influence of social background is a hidden social mechanism, and is not directly observable. Therefore, the effects of social backgrounds have to be introduced in the public debate.

Another factor which, together with social background variables, seems to have an impact on the choice of EMI is peer pressure, or, to put it more positively, peer support. Higher strata students seem to make their decisions rather independently of their peers. For lower strata students, peer attitude is a much stronger determinant of EMI choice. The ‘cautiously progressive perspective’ emphasizes stratification and equality issues. It overlaps with the ‘progressive perspective’ in that both perspectives do insist on further EMI offers towards internationalization and globalization. Yet, it also considers some arguments brought up by the ‘conservative perspective’ and solicits for HE management to take responsibility and act sensitively. Further arguments could be aligned with the ‘cautiously progressive perspective’, such as language challenges for lecturers, or the recommendation to seek compromise in parallel language use (Hjorth, 2013).

## Six recommendations for higher education practice

The previous sections have demonstrated the current state of English and EMI in Denmark. They have presented four perspectives on EMI by referring to a literature review of recent academic studies and media debates and own study results (Lueg, 2015; Lueg & Lueg, 2015). To transfer these findings into practice, six recommendations for HE practice and management are derived:

*1 – Further implementation of English as a medium of instruction should be pursued*

First, it is acknowledged that the globalization of education has no alternative in the leading universities (Doh, 2010), and that it can be efficiently processed by EMI. Thus, the author recommends further implementation of EMI. Studies emphasize that English proficiency and an EMI education are likely to increase job market chances for graduates. Thus, all students should be supported if they want to overcome barriers that keep them from opting for EMI to avoid inequality of chances. Still, this recommendation comes with constraints: It should be clear that the way how EMI is realized in practice will determine its success and social acceptance. A cautiously

putting to work of EMI is crucial for equal chances and a cultural acceptance of the increasing symbolic value of the English language.

*2 – Universities could offer classes for English language practicing*

Therefore, the second recommendation concerns university management: it has been shown that it is not de-facto capabilities, but perceived barriers and fears that are responsible for the self-selection of lower strata students against EMI. Thus, offers that aim at increasing the English competence of students are helpful, but not sufficient. Rather, policy makers should allay concerned students' fears about the difficulty of EMI programs and enable them to overcome those doubts. On an organizational level, this could be embedded in orientation weeks, tutoring and mentoring programs, and EMI introductory courses with a focus on discourse and participation. English tutoring systems and writing classes (maybe on peer tutoring basis) should be established to prevent further social stratification by private tutoring as it can be observed in some socially more stratified Asian regions where expensive supplementary assistance is needed to keep up with the recent EMI shift (Jeong, 2004; Kang, 2012). Even though English proficiency does not appear to be the de facto problem, English language practice might raise self-consciousness and thereby lower the barriers to choose EMI.

*3 – Employers requiring English skills could cooperate closely with universities*

Third, it is recommended to connect language proficiency and EMI to the job market. It has been demonstrated that lower strata students are aware of the benefit of EMI for the job market, but still refrain from selecting EMI. It could help to demonstrate that jobs that require English as a lingua franca are in fact available and accessible for these students. This could be achieved by practice days, internships, or by establishing a closer relationship with internationally employed alumni. Since choice-making seems to be the crucial class-divider, mandatory student participation in such activities should at least be discussed. Potential employers, especially those in the field of professional (corporate) communication, should make clear application fields of English as a working language. Students might be relieved to hear that English is mostly used as a lingua franca between non-native speakers and that a mother tongue level is only rarely required.

*4 – Lecturers could adjust to a learner- and content-oriented instruction style*

Fourth, on the classroom-level of didactics, a “truly rational pedagogy“ (Bourdieu, 1979a: 76) could contribute to lowering barriers and fears. This instruction style demands focus on content rather than on language. For example, teachers’ assessment of assignments should relate to the students’ performance regarding content rather than exact linguistic abilities or rhetorical style (Baudelot, 1994; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This learning style is especially suitable in settings where student heterogeneity is encouraged and embraced didactically (Bank, Ebbers, & Fischer, 2011; Drinck, 2011). Obviously, the content strategy will fail in learning situations aiming, primarily, at language proficiency. In case of applicability, lecturers and course administrators should address the role of English proficiency, in their course descriptions, to prevent self-selection. They might point to proficiency criteria as precise as possible, varying from highest linguistic standards to sheer comprehensibility of the assignment. Since irrationally perceived barriers and fears by the students are considered crucial, good experience with quantitative indications of the extent to which language proficiency will affect the assignment grade is emphasized here. An example of how this can be done is the description “*Eksaminandens sproglige kompetence indgår med 1/3 i karakteren.*” (“*The linguistic competence of the student composes 1/3 of the grade.*”) (M.A. course description with German as medium of instruction, AU, 2013). Even though such exact weighing is challenging to conduct when grading papers, students might at least stop fearing complete failure. If the university’s goal is to prepare students for the international and cross-cultural job market, it is crucial to point out that “*cross-cultural communication [...] involves more than good language skills. Rather, what one discusses, when, and how can vary along cultural lines.*” ( St.Amant, 2013: 33). In the case of Denmark, this concerns external examiners as well: Danish HE institutions have established a peer-review system on assignments to ensure transparency and avoid teacher-bias. Many assignments will be graded by an external censor, who is often a practitioner. It is crucial that practitioner and lecturer/researcher agree on the role of language. And the profession of the censor has to match the task to be evaluated.

5 – *University administration should explicitly frame English as medium of instruction as the lingua franca of non-native speakers*

Fifth, the expectation towards English language use by academic staff, administration and students has to be addressed. One central observation is that students not only fear lower grades due to low English competence, but also expect lecturers to be highly proficient in transmitting the language. This expectation is fostered by university administration: questions in student evaluations such as “*How do you assess the teacher’s language competence?*” (or similar) a) give the impression that the lecturer has to perform on a flawless proficiency level and b) put students in the role of linguistically superior judges. Such questions might build hypercritical expectations and comments as to the lecturer’s English proficiency and, especially, accent. Most absurdly, this can lead to low evaluations of English mother tongue speakers that do not have a BBC-compatible British accent. Therefore, it is argued that EMI should be framed and mediated as a true lingua franca without territorial and political ownership. In a globalized world, getting used to different accents and vocabulary within the English language should be seen as necessity and a competence in itself.

*6 – University management should establish consistent and equal parallel language use*

Sixth, concerns about “*domain loss*” (s. earlier) have to be taken seriously to prevent political harnessing. EMI cannot be implemented without an official, transparent and consistent language use policy in HE institutions. Consistent use of parallel language (Danish and English) in communicating with the scientific staff is recommended. This could avoid the impression that one language is superior and, much simpler, ensure the dissemination of information. To prevent political or cultural concerns about domain loss, lecturers can include literature by domestic researchers (in English) whenever possible. It is emphasized that regional research traditions might indeed get lost when focusing on working with, for example American textbooks exclusively. Future development of publishing habits will hopefully contribute to a more stable position of European theory traditions in English language publications and journals. Radically negative perspectives on EMI could be prevented if the official language strategy would be as detached as possible from discussions about making concessions to courting international students or staff. The emphasis of such a connection might be perceived as a cultural assault. A good practice example is that of

University of Copenhagen's Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use, that advocates "*consistently high standards of language use, in Danish as well as in English*". The centre consequently offers in-house-courses in Danish (e.g. conversation, pronunciation, and writing skills) to international employees (CIP, 2013a). In general, it is recommended to focus on the argument of the sheer necessity of EMI (as a choice) for employability and cultural connectivity. This stance is less confronting and finds reasonable backup in recent studies.

In summary, this paper provides insights into the current state of English and EMI in Denmark and gives recommendations for HE management and practitioners. The relationship between social origin, social equality, and EMI is emphasized. A 'cautiously progressive perspective', that allows for a sensitive approach to the implementation of EMI, is advocated. It is hoped, by the author, to contribute to the current debates on EMI and to equality of chances and internationalization in education.

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## Author



### **Klarissa Lueg**

Assistant Professor, Dr.phil, Department of Business Communication, Aarhus University

Klarissa Lueg is assistant professor at Aarhus University School of Business and Social Sciences. She holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Technology Darmstadt. Her current research centers on internationalization and sociocultural diversity in higher education. Her work appeared in *Academy of Management, Learning and Education*; *Studies in Higher Education*; *Journal of Social Science Education*; and *Race, Gender, and Class*.

### **Contact:**

[lueg@bcom.au.dk](mailto:lueg@bcom.au.dk)

Aarhus University

School of Business and Social Sciences

Department of Business Communication

Jens Chr. Skous Vej 4

8000 Aarhus C – Denmark

T: ++45 871 65463