

The future of language degrees

Report of CEL/ELC special interest group

Executive summary

Young people graduating from university know that it is increasingly important to be able to work in different linguistic and cultural environments. As a result, students of many different subjects are taking up language learning. At the same time, specialist degrees concentrating on language studies are coming under significant pressure in many European countries. In some countries, language departments are closing and the future of language degrees is called into question. Important social changes have affected the study preferences of students, often accelerated by the economic crisis of the last four years. There have been changes in schools, in career expectations for students and in government priorities.

This report attempts to understand the changes that are happening, what issues they raise and how language degrees can use their strengths and find new opportunities. It addresses the questions: What is a language degree? What are pressures are they experiencing? What opportunities for development are available? What issues must be addressed? And what strengths do language degrees have?

The report finds that language degrees make Europe's graduates more employable in a global context, but that they will have to make more explicit their specific expertise and contribution. Existing programmes were established to meet a variety of needs, particularly for translation and interpreting and for teaching and research in languages and cultures. This report suggests that further research is now needed to establish more precisely what the new needs are. It identifies possibilities in the growing need for cultural mediators, and in the growing number of careers that now require a high level of intercultural awareness.

It suggests that work is required to identify the unique competences of language graduates and to design language degrees that take better advantage of them. The diversity in language degrees is a source of richness and invention, but can also bring fragmentation and misunderstanding. Enhancing collaboration is an urgent need, both for the future development of language degrees and for the future success of their graduates.

What is a language degree?

Languages are taught in many varied forms in higher education, and often the same institution has several academic units that carry some responsibility for teaching in the area of languages. While most universities provide



support for language learning for students on many degree programmes, there are fewer degree programmes in which students can study languages as an integral part of their degree. Each type of specialist language degree has a particular history and identity, and each has a different outcome in potential careers for students. They fall into the following types, though they are sometimes combined in practice as universities learn from each other.

Modern languages/philology

The longest established degree programmes are those that combine the study of language and literature. In some countries these are called Modern Languages, and in other countries Philology degrees, referring to their origins at a time when the principal purpose of studying literature was to deepen the students' understanding of language. These degrees were introduced in most countries from the end of the 19th century and took their pattern from the study of Classical Languages, which focused on a canon of the most esteemed authors. The first focus of literary study was on the use of language (broadly grammar and rhetoric) and this was extended first to include literary analysis and then to the study of classical civilisations as a background to understanding the literary and philosophical texts.

Many philology degrees involve only one foreign language, though they may in some cases involve two. They have traditionally focused on the major Germanic and Romance languages, but other languages are playing a growing role (Slavonic, Middle Eastern and Asian languages). In more recent years, much debate has turned on theoretical frameworks for analysis such as gender studies, post-colonial studies and cultural studies. The canonical works have been extended to include a wider range of writers. Other cultural forms are often included, especially cinema and audio-visual culture. There has also been some tendency for the study of linguistics to become more prominent. Philology degrees are mainly taught in older established universities.

In some countries, most of the students of these degrees take up a career in teaching. In other countries, the degree is mainly seen as a liberal arts qualification.

Applied languages

Degree programmes in applied languages were established mainly from the 1960s onwards, and tend to be concentrated in newer universities. They focus on learning languages with reference to particular social settings, often in business contexts. In addition to increasing language competence, often in at least two foreign languages, these programmes may provide detailed study of different aspects of societies, such as social and political structures and the business environment. In recent years, much debate has focused on the place of intercultural communication. In many cases, the degrees are located in a school of business or social studies, and the language related studies are now often a minor component.

The degrees frequently have a strong vocational emphasis, preparing students to work in particular areas of business or the professions.



Translation and interpreting

Courses in translation and interpreting have been established in some countries since the 17th century, though most of those now active were established during the 20th century. In many cases, first cycle degrees in applied languages include components of interpreting and translating, but the majority of more specialised professional degrees are postgraduate qualifications, situated in the second cycle of studies.

There are relatively small numbers of professional courses across Europe and they are primarily concerned to prepare students to enter employment in the language industries.

Language based area studies

Since the 1960s, a range of specialist programmes have been developed, in which languages are combined with historical and political studies of a particular country or area. The EU has strongly promoted European studies and there is widespread interest in American Studies and Latin American Studies. Other areas studied include Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Language studies have normally been an integral part of these degrees, particularly where the area has one or two dominant languages.

Language-based area studies have generally been recognised as strategically important, and graduates often find employment in government agencies, non-governmental organisations and international corporate enterprises.

Languages in education

Courses in language teacher training take two main forms. They may be integrated into a first cycle degree in philology or applied languages, sometimes with an additional second cycle component. Or they may be a second cycle degree, open to students who have studied a first degree in philology or applied languages. In many cases, the focus of the course is on pedagogy, but in some cases it is focused on philology. In recent years, there has been increasing focus on teaching one's own language as a second or foreign language.

These courses generally lead to an officially recognised status as teacher and to employment in school nationally, or to employment internationally as a teacher in the public or private sector.

What are the pressures on language degrees?

Many different types of pressures affect the ability of universities to offer degrees with foreign language courses as part of them. Some pressures are external, imposed by changes in education, societal developments or specific, national political decisions. Other pressures derive from university internal developments such as interdepartmental competition. The main pressures are briefly outlined.

Changes in primary and secondary schools

The latest Eurobarometer study shows that language competence across Europe is in decline. Fewer citizens than previously have competence in two languages other than their first language (MT+2). Added to this, and perhaps more serious, there seems to be



a decline in the perception of relevance of knowing major foreign languages other than English. Thus, the idea of the relevance of foreign languages puts pressure on universities' offer of language degrees.

On the other hand, the latest barometer also shows that Chinese is being studied more widely. The reason undoubtedly is that the prevailing political discourse promotes a growth potential related to knowledge of Chinese, whereas the same discourse plays down the relevance of other, even major European languages in many countries.

Languages are under pressure in the entire education system in many countries. Changes made to curricula in primary and secondary school affects the uptake of language degrees at university level.

In many countries, languages are being cut (severely) in primary and secondary school. For example: in Denmark a reform of secondary education has meant that just 3% leave with knowledge of three foreign languages against 41% before the reform. Similarly, an OECD report (September 2010) showed that "secondary school pupils in the UK spend less time studying languages than anywhere else in the developed world". An English report, *Review of Modern Foreign Languages Provision in Higher Education in England* paints a bleak picture of the challenges faced by language degrees that probably also applies to many other countries across Europe.

This development has an in-built self-reinforcing tendency. When fewer students graduate with language or related degrees, recruitment of language teachers for primary and secondary education suffers. As a best practice example, the 'Foreign Language Centre' in Norway has taken a number of initiatives that look promising in the sense that they seem to work towards reversing the trend, but it will take a long time to assess how it will affect language degrees.

The utility value of languages

There is an increasing concern that subjects studied at university should have an immediate and recognisable usefulness. The resulting 'utility culture' works against the type of subjects that 'take time'. The recognition that it is time-consuming and hard work to really acquire foreign language competence at a high level means that students may be deterred from studying languages.

The 'utility culture' entails an increasingly instrumental approach to both education and research. This probably challenges the humanities, including languages, more than other university subjects. The tendency towards the knowledge being imparted to students being readily applicable on a rapidly shifting labour market challenges language degrees.

Global role of English

Large parts of the labour market are becoming increasingly globalised. Instead of this being an advantage for language degrees, the predominant use of English seems to pull in the opposite direction. Just as the value of possessing a telephone increases with the number of people possessing them, the value of a good command of English increases with the number of people across the world knowing English. This tends to reduce the



value of bothering to learn additional languages, at least when it comes to the job market.

The Bologna process, paradoxically, puts pressure on language degrees or language learning (outside English) at universities. It is increasingly expected, and practiced, that students going on exchange can study in English in non-English speaking countries and that universities in non-English speaking countries offer whole degree programmes in English. The relevance for students to learn the local languages for other than social purposes decreases as a consequence. So: the room given to other languages at the lower levels in the education system has drastic consequences for language degrees at universities.

Economic pressures

The financing of university education in general has a tendency to disadvantage languages. Both because of the utility culture but also because languages as 'soft' subjects tend to be given lower priority when university funding is reduced in times of economic crisis.

Because of the nature of language learning, the same advantages of scale that other university subjects may utilize are difficult for language programmes to copy.

What are the opportunities for language degrees?

As well as bringing pressures to bear, the changes taking place in the world also bring new opportunities. These arise in many different contexts:

Context of world: There is increasing demand for flexibility of the workforce and growing attention for generic skills. There are new kinds of jobs in languages, such as language technology, terminology management, web editing, international media, and culture. There has been an intensification of internationalization in politics, business and leisure. Migration and mobility have become key features of life in almost every country.

Context of higher education: There is increased flexibility in degree programmes. The Common European Framework of Reference allows a clear articulation of linguistic needs. There are more students than ever in higher education, including larger numbers of students with foreign roots.

Context of research insights: Developments in our discipline enable new areas to be added to the curriculum, which may be attractive to students. These include, for example, discourse studies, language acquisition research and ethnography.

New opportunities

As a result of these changes, a number of new opportunities can be identified:

There is a growing range of 'language' professions for which language degrees can train people, or at least prepare them.

Language degrees provide a good basis for generic skills that are language based, such as analyzing and summarizing.



Language degrees have an inherent capacity for interdisciplinarity, since language is always 'about something'. If this is exploited, graduates will be informed about and used to working with content outside their domain.

High level language learning involves abstract thinking, such as insight into patterns and structures. This is a transferable skill.

Learning a language to a high level of proficiency is not easy, as can be demonstrated by means of the different levels of the CEFR, and by means of research results. So it cannot be considered as an easily acquirable skill.

Different levels of professional language competence are needed – also in ('new') languages not offered at secondary school level, e.g. migrant languages, or languages of the East.

Increase in internationalization means increase in the need for foreign languages, and not just English, to foster in-depth contacts. Understanding the language means understanding the worldview.

Second generation immigrants are good candidates for degrees combining the language of their parents and the language of the country where they live.

Degree combinations with languages and professionally oriented subjects have been made possible.

Language learning in HE can be strengthened using insights from language acquisition research.

Making use of the opportunities

Language departments can explore these new opportunities in the light of the degrees they offer and the expertise they have in different fields. They can develop pilot projects and share experiences.

In the process, departments need to be active in demonstrating their usefulness to business and government, and to find the means to convince prospective students. They can, for example, illustrate career opportunities that their degree opens up and demonstrate that they deliver high-level knowledge and skills. They can also illustrate the wider assets they offer, such as more generic skills such as communication, team working, problem solving, project management and networking.

What are the issues for language degrees?

In responding to the pressures and opportunities, language departments need to examine the internal issues which may have impeded them in recognising the nature of changes or in finding innovative responses in a timely fashion. This section seeks to identify the kind of difficulties that may exist and offers some suggestions to overcome them.



Recognizing assets

Language degrees need to enable students to validate and certify their formation and qualification as cultural mediators. It has been the experience of innumerable language and literature instructors throughout Europe to see their students bloom after a study stay abroad. While all recognize the invaluable asset of language learning, multilingualism, and multi-lingual experience in another country, many degrees do not explicitly recognize and validate that asset.

Student attributes and attitudes

Students come to university from school with varying types and degrees of literacy in (foreign) language(s) that do not always match the current demands and expectations of university degree programmes. Given changing political and social imperatives in many European countries, student populations have become more diverse and less easily categorized in terms of abilities and ambitions. Students are increasingly concerned with the potential value of their studies for their future employment, and tend to compare the career advantages of language degrees with the benefits of other subject areas.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to develop greater flexibility to accommodate these wider societal changes.
- 2) Language degrees need to offer answers to the often asked question “what can I do with this degree?”
- 3) Language degrees need to come up with innovative responses that do not rely on standard vocational options, such as teaching.

Curriculum design

It remains difficult to define a curriculum that moves beyond the traditional box-like structure that encases subjects apart from each other. It is therefore a challenge to adopt a less fragmented approach that gives priority not only to integration between subjects and across other disciplines, but also relevance of content and skills.

Language degrees at the applied end of the spectrum tend to be associated with practical skills rather than research skills and academic rigour. Curricula should therefore highlight the research component of degrees which may include writing research proposals, researching companies in preparation for a placement year, and conducting ethnographic studies while abroad.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to target alternative career paths and highlight those elements that make their graduates an asset to a range of professions. Language degrees need to define learning outcomes for language proficiency in a variety of contexts, but also for cultural agility and research skills.
- 2) Language degrees need to overcome scepticism about, and resistance to, utility-based change among some university teachers.



- 3) Language degrees need to devise strategies of cross-university collaboration, especially for fields with restricted number of students. This will enable institutions to reduce the pressure put on them by the need of increased pedagogical flexibility and students' targeted profiling.
- 4) Strategies need to be developed to support language degrees that have few students, or have a wide range of profiles. They often struggle to achieve a critical mass to ensure feasibility. Strategies need to address the complex financial and organizational difficulties that arise.
- 5) Language degrees face the difficulty of finding relevant and efficient ways of attesting the new skills developed in language learning.
- 6) An overall issue is the choice of language of instruction and assessment and the degree to which this should be the target language.

Marketing matters

Language degrees have something of a branding problem and are faced with mounting difficulties in selling themselves in what is an increasingly competitive market. This may be due to a lack of broad appeal to a target audience that includes not only prospective students but also employers. Raising the profile of language degrees and cementing some form of brand in the public imagination is at least partly dependent on dealing with the student and curriculum issues raised above.

It is a further problem that the nature and value of language degrees is not sufficiently known by school students who are considering their future university studies. School students may not have sufficient contact with universities to gain a clear understanding of what is involved and the difference between studying at school and university.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to demonstrate more convincingly that they are not a luxury but that they offer a pathway to a broad range of careers.
- 2) University staff need to consider how they can foster greater understanding of language degrees in schools, for example through outreach work and cooperation with schools and school teachers.
- 3) Language degrees should offer options for students to work with schools as 'ambassadors' for languages, with appropriate training. They should also offer opportunities for teachers to undertake continuous professional development.

What are the strengths of language degrees?

This section points out that language degrees provide a distinctive education with many benefits to learners that are often not recognised.

Cultural agility

Learning languages is intrinsically a multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary activity. Learners of languages have to utilise skills that reach far beyond transcoding from one linguistic code to another. Learning a language calls for a sense of history, geography, philosophy, poetry, communication and semiotics, to mention a non-exhaustive list of fields. Thus, when learning languages, students progress in fields of knowledge that



make them more competent and skilful in multiple domains, which in turn makes them more professionally marketable.

This increased cultural agility not only exposes students to different disciplines of thought, but just as importantly it teaches them about the relations among the latter. Learning languages is a multidisciplinary activity, in that it borrows from curricular activity employed in areas ranging from writing for academic purposes, through to media studies, film, television and computing. It is also multidisciplinary in that it exposes learners to fields that are often tightly partitioned and to which they would not have had access. By gaining a language degree a student may gain insights into film studies, but also sociology or physics. In a world where boundaries between disciplines, but also between technology and the humanities, are collapsing, learning languages is an economical means of exposing oneself to several disciplines and exploring the links between them.

Cultural agility and the ability to work across disciplinary boundaries are attributes highly valued by employers. Language degrees need to highlight in their curriculum, their learning outcomes and their communication with external stakeholders how these skills are developed and how they may be applied in the world of work, postgraduate study or academic research. Building on their expertise in engaging students in communications across cultures and disciplines, language degrees should also seek to lead in the development of employability strategies in their institutions.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) A unique feature of language studies is to promote the mutual knowledge and understanding of languages and cultures. They need to formulate learning outcomes relating to the development of cross-cultural understanding
- 2) Language degrees need to use their expertise in intercultural and cross-disciplinary communication to shape their institutions' employability agenda
- 3) Language degrees need to validate the student's capabilities to translate from/into their own culture.
- 4) Language degrees need to recognize the inter-cultural experience to offer a unique possibility to view one's own culture from a renewed perspective. Thus, the promotion of language studies is not limited to technical aspects, but includes, on the contrary political and ethical questions.

Entering the realms of others

Language acquisition has a socio-political dimension. Learning more than one language is a powerful means of breaking out of one's own cultural, political and ideological isolation, as it enables learners to enter the realms of others. It is essential, then, to note that in any process of multilingual acquisition, that process is double. On the one hand, the learner initiates a move toward other peoples and cultures, even as his or her culture is approached and entered by them.

Main points for language degrees:



- 1) Language degrees need to recognize the new competencies acquired by students exposed to other cultures.
- 2) More research is needed to establish how language degrees enable students to become cultural mediators and what further steps are needed to enhance this capability.

Critical reflection

Multilingualism fosters the development of a meta-language: the ability to speak and think about language and communication. By reflecting on their own language and that of others, learners develop specific skills connected with the new linguistic aptitudes: for example, analytical skills, communicative skills, and inter-cultural communicative skills. In addition, they develop the ability to stand outside a communication or another activity, and to think critically about it.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to recognize the added value of the transversal skills thus acquired
- 2) Language degrees need to recognize the capacity to reflect critically on professional and social practices and encourage students to consider how to act upon them to change and improve them.

Thinking outside the box

Language learning enables learners to “think out of the box.” By realizing where the boundaries of one’s own culture and thinking are, learners access forms of creativity and personal development they would not have suspected otherwise. Language affects all fields of culture, even those, like architecture or engineering, where language might appear as a simple medium to communicate content. A closer look at the question will show that language is part and parcel of computing as well as medicine, and that computer scientists or medical doctors with a training in language may find it a benefit in thinking about their respective fields of expertise.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to recognize the creative capabilities fostered by (multi) linguistic formation.
- 2) Language degrees need to recognize the benefits that language learning can offer to students in other fields of competence.

Expanding communicative networks

Multilingualism spreads virally. It is a mantra of the contemporary world that it is a village and that it is interconnected. However, a quick survey of contemporary means of communication will show that information is often predictable, repetitive and redundant. Not only does a multilingual formation enable trainees to communicate effectively and appropriately, it also enables them to expand their communicative networks beyond grids pre-formatted by technological language.



Further research is needed to establish how far the increase in personal development for holders of language degrees can generate new economic possibilities, for example in facilitating new contacts, new market openings or newly generated projects. It may well prove that the relatively modest investment (in time, energy, money) devoted to multilingual acquisition has far-reaching effects and can offer a considerable return on capital.

Main points for language degrees:

- 1) Language degrees need to recognize their learners' capability to produce innovative, productive and efficient communication.
- 2) Language degrees need to recognize that they may be able to accelerate the formation of students in their specific fields of competence by developing access to a wider range of social and cultural opportunities.

Taking advantage of unique assets

This report demonstrates that those responsible for language degrees face many challenges from the changes currently taking place. But they are not without resources, and the changes are creating new opportunities and needs, which language degrees are well placed to meet.

The report highlights the key role language degrees play in making Europe's graduates more employable in a global context. It cautions at the same time, however, that as other disciplines internationalise their curricula language degrees will have to make more explicit their specific expertise and contribution.

Different degree programmes were established to meet a variety of needs. This report identifies some of these, but suggests that further research is now needed to establish more precisely what the new needs are. Some established needs will continue to be important, particularly in translation and interpreting and in language teaching. However, these professions are themselves undergoing rapid change and it will be important for language degrees to respond creatively to address the changes.

Outside the traditional language professions, new roles are emerging to which language degrees can and should respond. There is a growing need for cultural mediators, who are able to work across geographical and cultural borders to connect different communities and to negotiate between different worldviews. A growing number of careers now require people to have a high level of intercultural awareness, which enables them to build relationships with individuals and organisations from a wide range of different cultural perspectives.

Graduates from language degrees possess an impressive array of competences. In some cases, their attributes may be common to graduates of several subject areas, but there are certainly competences that are distinctive to language graduates. Work is required to identify these unique assets more precisely and then to design language degrees that take better advantage of them. As this report shows, there are many opportunities for



language degrees to grasp, but there are also challenges ahead, not least in finding the flexibility to respond to new needs in a timely way.

There is a great diversity in the profile and organisation of language degrees, which is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, variety is a source of richness and invention. On the other hand, variety can also bring fragmentation and misunderstanding. The key to building on strengths and overcoming weaknesses undoubtedly lies in collaboration. There are different levels of cooperation, exchange of ideas and good practices at institutional, national and European level. Enhancing collaboration is an urgent need, both for the future development of language degrees and more importantly for the future success of our graduates. Their degrees should enable them to move between universities and markets, and prepare them for a future in which they can thrive as citizens of a rich and diverse Europe.

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November 2012