



# The Role of Languages in the European Higher Education Area

---

**Memorandum**

**Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council (CEL/ELC)**

**December 2015**

## Introduction

Closely linked to the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), internationalisation seems to be considered one of the main drivers of quality and quality enhancement in higher education. In tandem with this, individual and societal multilingualism is considered a key characteristic of Europe today. At the same time, English is ubiquitous, and an increasing number of higher education programmes is being offered through English. This has created an unfortunate dichotomy between multilingualism and English Medium Instruction (EMI), and it therefore seems appropriate to reconsider the concept of multilingualism and for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to consider how they can embrace individual multilingualism as well as English, including EMI.

The Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council (ELC) has developed the following memorandum in 2014-15 after consultation with representatives of the four European associations known as the 4Es in the Bologna Process: European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and European Students Union (ESU).

The ELC wishes to thank the colleagues representing the four associations for their contributions to this process.

## Aim

The aim of the memorandum has been to

- identify key linguistic and intercultural skills and competences that would be considered essential for European graduates and their employability; and
- recommend actions to be taken in order to ensure that students at European HEIs are given the opportunity to develop these skills and competences in the course of their studies.

In the development of the memorandum, data and information available from major European projects and reports have been considered; unfortunately, more often than not, this has also been an exercise in looking for what is in fact not there. Multilingualism may be a political goal in Europe, but concrete examples of how this is achieved in the HEIs of the EHEA are still limited; a Europe-wide picture of the current situation can only be established with considerable gaps and therefore needs to be properly researched.

## Background

The development outlined in the introduction above is referred to in a Communication from the European Commission (2013), in which it is stated that *proficiency in English is de facto part of any internationalisation strategy for learners, teachers and institutions (...)*, but also that *multilingualism is a significant European asset: it is highly valued by international students and should be encouraged in teaching and research throughout the higher education curriculum*. Individual multilingualism and intercultural communication skills seem to be considered important for the employability of graduates everywhere; however, while it may be a very well-considered decision to use English as the *lingua franca* or *lingua academica*, more often than not, it seems to be to the detriment of multilingualism and linguistic diversity. The question is therefore how HEIs can embrace the concept of multilingualism as well as the unique position of English together.

In Europe today, all HEI graduates need to be proficient in more languages in order for them to study and work professionally in multilingual settings. In a globalised world, not only the immediately mobile students and graduates, but rather all students and graduates need competences and skills in more than their own first language (mother tongue) – even those whose first language is English. This memorandum therefore focuses on the linguistic and intercultural competences and skills of non-language students and graduates, whereas students and graduates of language programmes, language and areas studies programmes, translation and interpreting programmes, etc. will not be the focus of attention here. It must be assumed that they are already competent in more languages even though they may need to develop their skills and competences further as part of their studies.

## Key linguistic and intercultural competences and skills

This section is divided into three parts:

- The role of English in higher education;
- Learning and teaching through another language than one's first language, that is, through a second (L2) or third (L3) language;
- Linguistic and intercultural competences and skills essential for European graduates and their employability.

## The role of English

The role of English can easily be both under- and overestimated. In many parts of the world, it is a must for intercultural communication purposes in professional contexts. However, it should not be forgotten that it is not the first foreign language everywhere, and that there are many countries – also in Europe – where other major languages are more widely spoken and understood (European Commission 2012).

As part of their internationalisation policies and strategies, European HEIs offer programmes in English to attract an increasing number of international students to their campuses. While this development originally started in the north-western part Europe, it now seems to be spreading to most of the continent. A 2014 survey demonstrates that in the past 10 years EMI programmes in Europe have increased by more than 1,000 per cent, and that there are now more than 7,000 degree programmes offered in English outside the

UK and Ireland (Wächter & Maiworm 2014). There are still considerable differences in the pace and volume of this development; but a couple of factors worth noticing are that that EMI programmes are now also spreading in the countries of other major European languages (France, Germany and Spain), and that a significant number of home students also enrol in EMI programmes in those countries.

Despite the volume of EMI programmes offered, students learn through a range of different languages which are a second or third language for the individual student. It therefore makes sense to generalise and briefly address the issue of learning through one's second (L2) or third (L3) language, irrespective of whether this takes place in the student's home country (country of residence) or when the student engages in mobility and studies in another country.

### **Learning and teaching through L2 or L3**

The fact that students learn through their L2 or even L3, leads to a very fundamental question: Do the students have a sufficiently high level of language – and academic language – skills and competences to learn through a given language (Lx)? Some students obviously do have the skills and competences since they are able to complete programmes in Lx. However, in the IntlUni project, a survey among the partner institutions in 27 countries showed that there are considerable linguistic challenges that ought to be addressed. Even though students are required to be proficient in their language of study, and even have obtained the required level in the internationally recognised language tests, not all of them are sufficiently prepared to study through what is their L2 or L3, and for these students quite serious academic language and communication barriers can be observed (IntlUni 2013). Unless this group of students are offered language instruction or – at least – access to self-study resources, this situation will negatively impact on what they are able to achieve during their studies.

Moreover, in many cases the HEIs only require the relevant language test results from full-degree students, and the exchange students are not necessarily tested at all. This invariably leads to European HEI classrooms where there are vast differences in the linguistic capabilities among students, a situation that often leads to considerable frustration for students as well as their lecturers. That being said, the European picture of this situation is very complex, but it is important to draw attention to the fact that more than 25 years into the Erasmus and similar mobility programmes, there are still some language issues that need proper attention in the internationalisation of European higher education.

In addition to the situation described for the students, it should also be acknowledged that more and more lecturers are required to teach through what for them is an L2 or even L3. And just like the students, the lecturers often need to improve their own language skills, just as they need to know how they can support their students' learning through an L2 or L3.

In the countries of the major European languages such as, for instance, English, French, German, and Spanish, HEIs are able to attract students to study through the domestic or local languages. Even so, a rising number of HEIs on the European continent choose to also offer EMI programmes or programmes taught in other languages. It must be assumed that students choose these programmes to add an international dimension to their programmes of study whether these students are mobile or choose to study in their local environment.

In this context it is important to note that students do not necessarily improve their L2 or L3 skills and competences when they study through their L2 or L3. If they are to improve their language proficiency and intercultural communication skills in the course of their studies, these capabilities need to be explicitly trained. Ideally, this should be part of the L2 or L3 programme of study, e.g. in a Content and Language Integrated learning (CLIL) setting. This, however, is considered both time consuming and resource intensive, and is only found in a limited number of HEIs.

While some European HEIs have language centres or similar units that offer language programmes, often in combination with self-access resources, this is not the case everywhere, and students may therefore be left to their own devices both as regards their (academic) language of instruction and as regards the opportunity to learn other languages.

Language learning in non-language programmes may be, but is only rarely, included as an intended learning outcome, and it is also not necessarily ECTS credited. In these cases, in order to improve their language skills, students must attend language classes in addition to their regular ECTS credited classes, a task that many find too time-consuming (and expensive) with the detrimental effect that quite a lot of students do in fact not improve their language capabilities in the course of their studies.

The IntlUni Erasmus Academic Network (2012-15) addressed the challenges of the multilingual and multicultural learning space, that is, the international classroom where many students learn through the medium of their L2 or L3. The final outcomes of this project comprise the IntlUni Principles and Recommendations targeted at higher education institutions, national / regional authorities and European stakeholders (Lauridsen & Lillemose 2015).

## **Linguistic and intercultural competences and skills essential for European graduates and their employability**

The employability of graduates obviously depends on a number of factors among which adequate language and intercultural communication competences and skills are only a part; moreover, the importance of these competences and skills is closely linked to the context and content of a given job function.

Without questioning the privileged position of English in both higher education and professional work contexts, multilingualism is still high on the European agenda. At the European level, this is most recently seen in the Council *Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences* (Council of the European Union 2014); however, when it comes to the national, regional or institutional levels, it becomes quite difficult to get an overview of what is in fact needed in a specific context, and to gauge the extent to which training is provided in connection with a given programme of study. There are, obviously, many laudable national or local initiatives; however, it still seems fair to say that there is also a gap between the overarching political intentions and what might be called the reality on the ground.

The *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR; Council of Europe; no date) is generally used as the standard measuring stick for both the intended learning outcome level and for the actual individual proficiency level.

A couple of European and national initiatives deserve mentioning for providing frameworks within which the intended learning outcomes of students' language and intercultural communication competences and skills may be defined, or the students' and graduates' actual competences and skills may be described:

The MAGICC project (2011-2014) created a conceptual framework for multilingual and multicultural communication skills and competences based on, and providing an extension to, the CEFR. This conceptual framework may be used by HEIs when defining their intended learning outcomes, and by students, graduates and employers to describe or see what the individual graduate is able to do. In addition, MAGICC provides examples of how this can be used in a range of different pedagogical scenarios and provides an Academic ePortfolio that expands the features of the CEFR Portfolio.

The CELAN (2011-2013) project was launched from within the European Commission's Business Platform for Multilingualism. In its Vademecum it is noted that, in the first decade of the 21st century, *the relevance of multilingualism to competitiveness and employability has become a major issue in EU policy*, and the CELAN project consequently focused on the skills and competences needed in business communication. In this Vademecum are listed typical business activities for which internationally-oriented companies need employees with language and intercultural communication skills and competences. While some of these would typically be carried out by language specialist, quite a few of them would be taken care of by non-language specialist; similar functions may also be found in other professional sectors. The CELAN project does not address the question of when and how such competences and skills could or should be learned.

While not only the HEIs and other stakeholders involved in such projects will be able to learn from their outcomes and implement their recommendations in their own organisations, it would presumably be an exaggeration to state that they immediately have a Europe-wide impact in a short-term perspective. Rather, they should be considered toolboxes available to HEIs when they define policies and action plans for the language and intercultural skills and competences of their graduates; this would apply not only to their language(s) of instruction, but also to other languages.

On a national level, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) establishes subject benchmark statements, including one for *Languages and related studies* (QAA 2007). In this statement, the nature of the subject as well as the knowledge, skills and competences typically linked to a degree in this field of study are defined; in this particular case, it is explicitly mentioned that parts of these skills and competences are also applicable in shorter modules integrated in a non-language degree program. There is thus a national framework within which the individual HEIs may define the content of the programmes that they offer. Similar frameworks are also found in other countries.

## Conclusions

This memorandum has pointed towards the state of affairs in European higher education as regards the development of non-language students' and graduates' language skills and competences. English is ubiquitous and is almost taken for granted in most of the European continent, but the development of students' language skills and competences is only rarely specifically addressed in the reports available on the development of higher education internationalisation and the EHEA.

In higher education, outside the language and intercultural communication subjects, it seems to be taken for granted that students have the necessary language skills and competences, including academic literacy and academic writing skills. The extent of this obviously depends on the provision in the primary and secondary school systems, but with the migration that has increased considerably since the early 1990s within Europe, and not least with the current migration into Europe from other regions of the world, no HEI can take it for granted that students have the language and intercultural communication skills and competences taught in the national or local school system. While some HEIs have an explicit language – or language and culture – policy that can be accessed on the web, this is still the exception rather than the rule, and it does not necessarily reveal anything about the concrete implementations of such strategies. The same applies on a national or regional level, and in order to get a clearer picture of the situation and on initiatives to be taken, more research is needed on these issues.

In addition to this, there does not seem to be any Europe-wide analysis of the extent to which the HE accreditation agencies or other quality assurance bodies have any criteria specifically addressing the issue of student languages and intercultural communication skills. This also applies to the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation developed by the European Consortium for Accreditation (CeQuInt 2015).

Whether or not the issue of language and intercultural competences and skills is documented at national/regional or institutional levels, it is still there. Students need the appropriate skills and competences to successfully complete their studies and be adequately prepared for their professional careers in the multilingual and multicultural Europe today.

It is therefore of utmost importance that European HEIs take stock of the situation and assess the extent to which their students have the necessary language and communication skills, and that they make provisions so that all students have the opportunity to develop those skills and competences. This applies to the languages of instruction, including academic reading and writing, within higher education as well as to the language and intercultural skills and competences necessary in the professions. Higher education has a role to play and should take responsibility for providing the opportunity for students to develop their individual multilingualism before entering the professional world which for many of them is more global than local today.

Aarhus, DK in December 2015

Karen M. Lauridsen

## References

- CELAN. *Language Strategies for Competitiveness and Employability*. No date. Vademecum. LLP Network Project 2011-2013. <http://www.celan-platform.eu/assets/files/D%205.1%20Vademecum.pdf>.
- Council of Europe. No date. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Language Policy Unit, Strasbourg. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf).
- Council of the European Union. 2014. *Conclusion on multilingualism and the development of language competences*. Education, Youth, Culture, and Sport Council meeting.20.05.2014. [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142692.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142692.pdf).
- European Commission. 2012. *Europeans and their Languages*. Special Eurobarometer 386. [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_386\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf).
- European Commission. 2013. *European Higher Education in the World*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. COM (2013) 499 final. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0499:FIN:en:PDF>.
- European Consortium for Accreditation (eca). 2015. *Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation (CeQuInt)*. <http://ecahe.eu/home/about/projects/cequint/>
- The European Students' Union. 2015. *Bologna with Student Eyes 2015. Time to meet the expectations from 1999*. <http://www.esu-online.org/asset/News/6068/BWSE-2015-online.pdf>
- IntlUni – *The Challenges of the Multilingual and Multicultural Learning Space*. No date. Erasmus Academic Network. [www.intluni.eu](http://www.intluni.eu).
- IntlUni. 2013. *Work Package 3: Identification of linguistic, cultural and pedagogical/didactic challenges*. Synthesis report. [http://intluni.eu/uploads/media/WP3\\_synthesis\\_report.pdf](http://intluni.eu/uploads/media/WP3_synthesis_report.pdf).
- Lauridsen, K.M.; Lillemose, M.K. (eds). 2015. *Opportunities and challenges in the multilingual and multicultural learning space. Final document of the IntlUni Erasmus Academic Network 2012-15*. Aarhus: IntlUni. [http://intluni.eu/uploads/media/The\\_opportunities\\_and\\_challenges\\_of\\_the\\_MMLS\\_Final\\_report\\_sept\\_20\\_15.pdf](http://intluni.eu/uploads/media/The_opportunities_and_challenges_of_the_MMLS_Final_report_sept_20_15.pdf)
- MAGICC – *Modularising Multilingual and Multicultural Academic Communication Competence*. No date. LLP Programme 2011-2014. <http://www.unil.ch/magicc/home.html>.
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). 2007. *Languages and related studies*. Subject benchmark statement. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Subject-benchmark-statement-Languages-and-related-studies.pdf>.
- Sursock, A. 2015. *Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities*. EUA Publications. [http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/EUA\\_Trends\\_2015\\_web](http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/EUA_Trends_2015_web)

Wächter, B.; Maiworm, F. (eds). 2014. *English-Taught Programmes in European Higher Education. The State of Play in 2014*. Lemmens. ACA Papers on International Cooperation in Education.

## **Members of the European associations consulted in the development of this memorandum**

Stephan DELPLACE, EURASHE

Anca GREERE, ENQA

Maria KELO, ENQA

Maksimas MILTO, ESU

Monika STEINEL, EUA

Lesley WILSON, EUA