



# Higher Education Language Policy

*CEL-ELC Working Group*

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## Summary of recommendations

HEIs are encouraged, within the framework of their own societal context, mission, vision and strategies, to develop the aims and objectives of a Higher Education Language Policy (HELP) that allows them to implement these strategies. In this process, they may want to determine the needs, the measures that are already in place, and the measures that need to be put in place in order for them to do so.

The recommendations of the sections on pages 3-11 are meant to assist HEI leadership and management teams in this process. These recommendations are collected here:

As the first step in a Higher Education Language Policy, HEIs should determine the relative status and use of the languages employed in the institution, taking into consideration the answers to the following questions:

- What is/are the official language(s) of the HEI?
- What is/are the language(s) of communication at institutional / departmental / research group / administrative unit, etc. levels?
- What is/are the language(s) of instruction?
- Who are the HEI stakeholders / targets audiences, and which language(s) is / are used in communication with these audiences?

HEIs should further consider the following interrelated questions as regards the students:

- Given the programmes and the level of internationalisation the HEI has or wants to have, and as a direct implication of that, what are the language proficiency levels required by students who apply to its programmes?
- Given the programmes and the level of internationalisation the HEI has or wants to have, and as a direct implication of that, what are the language proficiency levels expected from the graduates of these programme?
- Given the profile of the HEI and its educational strategies, which language components are to be offered within and without the (non-language) degree programmes?

Students may need support for all four language skills (receptive and productive; oral and written); and in addition to that, they may need special support in academic reading and writing both in their first and their other languages.

As regards academic staff, HEIs should consider measures to validate formal as well as non-formal learning of the language of instruction.

Moreover, HEIs should consider the need for and their provision of

- Language courses for academic and non-academic staff in the language(s) of administration and communication.
- Language courses for researchers and lecturers in the language(s) of instruction.
- Language revision.
- Translation

## 1. Background: Language Policy – what and why?

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a dramatic increase in the internationalisation of higher education. This is due to a number of interrelated factors: Open borders and globalisation in general have first of all resulted in a significant increase in migration; secondly, globalisation has opened up new opportunities in countries and cultures with which most Europeans have previously had little or no contact at all. In addition to that, within Europe, the Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has sparked both educational development and student and staff mobility to a level that has never been seen before. These developments have a tremendous impact on the development of European higher education, and despite the differences that still exist among different kinds of higher education institutions (HEIs), and despite the differences in geographical location and the communities they serve, almost all European HEIs now face the benefits and the challenges of globalisation and internationalisation.

A Higher Education Language Policy (HELP) should always be seen within the national or regional context of the HEI in question, and it should be a function of the HEI mission, vision and strategies for research, education and service to HEI stakeholder communities. Across these core activities – a language policy establishes the languages of instruction and of administration and communication as well as the aims and objectives of language programmes, language support measures and the way in which these are put into practice within a particular HEI. The goal of this document is not to prescribe one specific way of doing this, but to address the components of a HEI language policy and thereby assist HEI leaders and management teams in the development of their own language policies.

Successful implementation of language strategies hinges on many interrelated factors, most crucially (1) that the programmes offered should prepare HE graduates for the – now global – labour market with the knowledge, skills and competences of the disciplines they have studied, and with cultural awareness, intercultural communication skills and a language repertoire that enable them to work both within and without their immediate local community; and (2) that researchers have the capability of sharing their knowledge through publication to the international scholarly community as well as to the national and local communities of non-expert stakeholders. In order for this to happen, not only the researchers, lecturers, and students, but also the librarians, technicians and administrative staff must have the necessary language skills.

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## 2. The basic tenets of a HE Language Policy

A HE Language Policy may encompass some or all the following principal areas:

- the HEI institutional language or languages; the language(s) of administration and communication;
- language degree programmes (e.g. modern language degrees; translation and interpreting; teacher training);
- languages for non-language students; languages for mobility and employment;
- the language(s) of instruction and language support for lecturers not teaching through the medium of their own first languages;

- language support for researchers;
- language support for librarians, technicians and administrative staff;
- languages for the wider community.

A key question is obviously which languages should be taught in a given HEI. The answer to this depends on a number of factors, among which are the following:

- the language repertoire that students already have or are expected to have when they enrol in a HE programme;
- the language repertoire that faculty and lecturers have or are expected to have;
- the geographical location of the HEI;
- the HEI mission and vision as well as the strategies that the HEI has adopted in order to enhance graduate mobility and employability.

This last point also includes preparing students for studies, internships or work in an international organisation (any public or private organisation with links across borders).

In the context of developing a HE Language Policy, it is important to consider new opportunities for collaboration, business, trade and industry in countries and cultures that were formerly outside the reach of the country in which the HEI is situated. The languages of such countries may be in increasing demand and might therefore be included in the range of languages offered. The ultimate decision as to which languages should be offered, should therefore also be seen within the geographical, economic and societal context of a given HEI.

In what follows in this document, language degree programmes, translation and interpreting, or teacher training programmes will not be dealt with. The content of such programmes and the range of languages offered are considered part of the educational strategy of the main academic area (faculty / school / college) responsible for these programmes. Where students do not have the language skills needed for entry to these programmes, the HEI may choose to include language provision for them as part of the HE language policy. The HEI may, of course, also choose to include all degree programmes in the language policy.

It should be noted that this document does not address the question of who should provide the language courses and language support measures needed within a given HEI. In principle there are several possibilities – a language department or language centre within a given academic area (faculty / school / college), a central language centre within and for the whole HEI, an HEI-external language centre, or any combination of these. These are issues that can only be resolved by the HEIs themselves in the light of their own specific contexts.

Finally, as important as the issue may be, this document does not attempt to prescribe a national language education policy from primary through to higher education. While language provision at primary and secondary levels does have significant implications for what may be expected from students and staff and for language provision requirements in higher education, such national or regional policies fall outside the scope of this document.

### 3. HEI institutional language or languages

It is important to determine the relative status of the languages employed in any given HEI. Is the HEI in question a monolingual HEI (the local language only; a major language such as English only)? Is it a truly bi- or tri-lingual HEI? Does the HEI have one official language (the national or regional language) and another (e.g. English) as its second language? Or does the HEI have two official languages (e.g. French and Flemish in Belgium; Finnish and Swedish in Finland) and maybe in addition to that another or third language?

These questions are important because they have widespread and significant implications for the language repertoire required from faculty, lecturers, students and staff, and for how the HEI communicates with internal and external stakeholders, in official documents, on its website, etc.

The following questions therefore need to be addressed:

- What is/are the official language(s) of the HEI?
- What is/are the language(s) of administration and communication at institutional / departmental / research group / administrative unit, etc. levels?
- What is/are the language(s) of instruction?
- Who are the HEI stakeholders / targets audiences, and which language(s) is / are used in communication with these audiences (e.g. current or future students; current or future faculty, lecturers, librarians, service and administrative staff; authorities; other HEIs; local community; the corporate sector; etc.)?

As it would be the case for any other policy within a HEI, it obviously needs to be determined who the decisions makers are and who the actors are at all levels of the organisation (HEI, faculties / schools, departments / centres / administrative units). Are the current actors (organisational units and individuals) capable of developing and implementing a language policy, or will the HEI need further organisational and human resources to do so. While this, as well as the issue of funding, is pivotal to the success of a language policy, it will not be dealt with further in this document as the question of resources (human or otherwise) is fundamental to any policy development and implementation.

As the first step in a Higher Education Language Policy, a HEI should determine the relative status and use of the languages employed in the institution, taking into consideration the answers to the following questions:

- What is/are the official language(s) of the HEI?
- What is/are the language(s) of administration and communication at institutional / departmental / research group / administrative unit, etc. levels?
- What is/are the language(s) of instruction?
- Who are the HEI stakeholders / targets audiences, and which language(s) is / are used in communication with these audiences?

## 4. Languages for students

Students in higher education form a much more heterogeneous group than ever before; there are

- local students whose first language coincides with the first (official, national) language of the country or region in which they live, and in which the HEI is situated;
- students of migrant families whose first language is considered a heritage language and for whom the official language of the country or region is a second or other language;
- exchange students;
- international students on full degree programmes.

Even these four groups cannot be considered well-defined entities; some of the students across these categories have a (very) limited language repertoire while others are truly multilingual. Some of the local students enrol in programmes targeted at the local community which are taught in their own first language. Others choose to enrol in programmes that also attract international students; these international programmes may be taught in the local language, especially if this is one of the major European languages. Finally, other programmes are taught through the medium of one of the major European languages in countries or regions where the local first language is another one of the major languages or is one of the less widely used and taught European languages.

It is therefore important to note that, in Europe today, even though many international programmes are in fact taught through the medium of English (English Medium Instruction – EMI – programmes in non-English language countries), there are certainly other international programmes taught through the medium of other (major European) languages.

### 4.1 Languages for non-language students - Languages for mobility and employment

Different kinds of language programmes or modules may be available to students in order to enhance their language proficiency as a key qualification for mobility and employability.

First of all, there are combined programmes such as Business and Language(s), International Law and Language(s), International Studies, Areas Studies, etc. Some of these programmes are simply taught in a given language without any language support for students learning through the medium of that language; other programmes are offered as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes, or at least partly as CLIL programmes.

In these programmes, language components would often be Language(s) for Special or Specific Purposes (LSP). Some of these programmes may require *ab initio* language instruction or language preparation at levels A or B in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while others would be at a higher level of the CEFR.

Secondly, additional language programmes (modules) – including language programmes for international students in the official language of the country / region / HEI in question – may be offered as either mandatory or optional.

- As a rule, if mandatory, such programmes
  - will have a certain number of ECTS credit points within a non-language degree programme;
  - may be an LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) module or have a certain LSP component.
- If optional, such programmes
  - may or may not have a certain number of ECTS credit points within a non-language degree programme;
  - may – or may not – be an LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) module or have a certain LSP component.
  - may – or may not – be offered free of charge for the students.

## 4.2 Students learning through the medium of another language

Today many students learn through the medium of another language than their own first language. These students may be characterised as belonging to one of the following groups:

- Students who choose to study abroad for a full degree or as part of an exchange programme and thereby also choose to study through the medium of another language.
- Home (domestic) students who choose to study through the medium of another language; in major parts of Europe, more often than not, this is English Medium Instruction (EMI programmes). The reasons for this choice may be twofold:
  - The students have the option to choose between similar programmes run in their own first language or run through the medium of another language.
  - The students can only enrol in a programme with a given specialisation if they enrol in, say, an EMI programme because the same specialisation is not available in their first language.
- Students who live and study in a country where the official language is not their first language, and for whom both the official language of the region / HEI or e.g. EMI programmes entail learning through the medium of another language (the student's second, third, ... language).
- Students enrolling in programmes in their heritage languages (e.g. children of migrants; returning expatriates; students whose families have been expatriated from their original home country). These students are not necessarily literate or fully literate in these languages.

Depending on the educational system in question, students may need language support / language courses in order to enrol at the next level of the system; examples of this would be:

- Students applying to programmes: Do they have the necessary language skills in their first or other languages? What are the minimum requirements? How are they ascertained?
- Migrant students: Do they have the necessary language skills to study in the official language of the HEI or in their second / third languages (e.g. English), or in their heritage languages? What are the minimum requirements? How are they ascertained?
- Do first, second and third cycle students have the necessary academic reading and writing skills needed (in their first, second or other foreign languages)?

- Do students need support in LSP (including the terminology) of their first, second or other foreign languages?

In order to establish a coherent and consistent language policy, it is important that a HEI considers which of the above strategies it intends to implement, both in the immediate future and in the long term. It should then list a concrete set of objectives based on some or all of the above points.

As part of a Higher Education Language Policy (HELP), an HEI should consider the following interrelated questions as regards the students:

- Given the programmes and the level of internationalisation the HEI has or wants to have, and as a direct implication of that, what are the language proficiency levels required by students who apply to its programmes?
- Given the programmes and the level of internationalisation the HEI has or wants to have, and as a direct implication of that, what are the language proficiency levels expected from the graduates of these programme?
- Given the profile of the HEI and its educational strategies, which language components are to be offered within and without the (non-language) degree programmes?

Students may need support for all four language skills (receptive and productive; oral and written); and in addition to that, they may need special support in academic reading and writing both in their first and their other languages.

## 5. Language support for lecturers

Like the students, the lecturers (HE teachers) also have very diverse linguistic repertoires. All of this has major implications for the languages used, the language programmes and the language support needed within the HEI.

Lecturers required to start teaching though the medium of another language than their own first language may need to enhance their skills in that language. Pedagogical, didactic and intercultural issues are not considered in this report even though they will be at least as important as the language skills.

Foreign lecturers may need support both in the official language of the region / HEI and, if it is a different one, in the language of instruction.

More often than not, the language proficiency of lecturers are taken for granted rather than ascertained by means of language tests or other measures designed to assess and validate formal as well as non-formal language learning.

As part of their HELP, HEIs should employ measures to validate lecturers' formal as well as non-formal learning of the language of instruction.

Moreover, HEIs should consider the need for and their provision of

- Language courses for lecturers in the language(s) of instruction.
- Language courses for lecturers in the language(s) of administration and communication.
- Translation or language revision of teaching materials.

## 6. Language support for researchers

Furthermore, faculty may need language support, including language revision and perhaps even translation, in order to publish in the appropriate media (scholarly journals and books, but also other media targeted towards a broader audience in the local / regional community).

Foreign faculty may need support both in the official language of the region / HEI and, if it is a different one, in the language(s) in which it is appropriate for them to publish their research.

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As part of their HELP, HEIs should consider the need for and their provision of

- Language courses for researchers in the language(s) in which they are expected to publish or otherwise communicate the results of their research.
- Language courses for researchers in the language(s) of instruction and of administration and communication.
- Pre-publication language revision.
- Translation.

## 7. Language support for librarians, technicians, administrative staff, and janitors

As an integral component in the internationalisation of any HEI, the librarians, technicians, administrative staff and janitors who have direct contact and communicate with international faculty, lecturers, students and other stakeholders, need to have the necessary language skills in order to do so.

As part of their HELP, HEIs should consider the need for and their provision of

- Language courses for librarians, technical and administrative staff in the language(s) of communication.

## **8. Languages for the wider community**

In some countries, HEIs provide general language courses or LSP courses to a wider audience. This, however, will not be further considered in this document.

## 9. Recommendations

HEIs are encouraged, within the framework of their own societal context, mission, vision and strategies, to develop the aims and objectives of a HE Language Policy that allows them to implement these strategies. In this process, they may want to determine the needs, the measures that are already in place, and the measures that need to be put in place in order for them to do so.

The recommendations of the above sections are meant to assist HEI leadership and management teams in this process. All recommendations are repeated in the box below.

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- Language courses for researchers and lecturers in the language(s) of instruction.
- Language revision.
- Translation

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