



MOLAN RES 1: Case Study Template

TITLE: Université Libre de Bruxelles 1: *Plan Langues – Faculté des Sciences appliquées*

AUTHOR: Ian TUDOR, Responsable académique, Langue anglaise

INSTITUTION: Université Libre de Bruxelles

CONTACT INFORMATION:

itudor@ulb.ac.be

+32.2.650.2506

Cellule Langues

CP110

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50

B-1050 Bruxelles

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

The study focuses on the *Plan Langues*, an initiative launched by the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB), as implemented within the *Faculté des Sciences appliquées* (FSA). The main lines of the initiative are similar to the Plan Langues as a whole (cf. MOLAN RES 1 *Université Libre de Bruxelles 1: Plan Langues*), namely the inclusion in 1st cycle students' academic programme of obligatory languages courses with a weighting of 8 ECTS. The target language is English. The *Plan Langues – FSA* highlights a number of key success factors. One is the integration of language learning into the broader goals of students' academic and professional training. This may be seen in the presence of a clearly defined *projet professionnel* at faculty level which emphasises the need for students to acquire multilingual and multicultural competences in order for them to be able to operate effectively in the current European and international workplace. Another is the creation of a wide range of language learning and language contact possibilities in parallel with the language teaching programme per se: these include exchange agreements, work placements, joint degree programmes, and encouragement of participation in international student activities. In this way, language learning is fully integrated into students' broader preparation for professional life. Indeed, the target language – English - is

a means for students to participate in a range of attractive and professionally rewarding activities, rather than simply another academic obligation. The case study therefore highlights the importance of presenting language learning within a broader set of academic and professional goals, as an empowering skill, rather than as an objective in its own right. On a more local level, it also underlines the motivational value of strong faculty support for language initiatives.

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE SUCCESS CASE

1.1 Scope of the initiative

This case study relates to an initiative undertaken as part of the *Plan Langues* of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) <http://www.ulb.ac.be/planlangues/> within one administrative unit of the ULB, the Faculty of Applied Science (*Faculté des Sciences appliquées - FSA*) <http://www.ulb.ac.be/facs/polytech/index.html>.

The initiative, *Plan Langues – FSA* (http://www.ulb.ac.be/facs/polytech/plan_langues.html), shares the same general objectives and structure as the *Plan Langues* in the other three faculties concerned (cf. Case Study **MOLAN ULB 1: *Plan Langues***), but with a number of features which merit specific attention. These relate to the specific implementation of the *Plan Langues* itself, and also to the broader faculty context within which the *Plan Langues* was adopted. The case study will not repeat background information on the *Plan Langues* as a whole, but will focus on its implementation within the framework of the FSA. For the sake of clarity, readers are therefore advised to consult **MOLAN ULB 1: *Plan Langues*** prior to the present case study.

The initiative targets 1st cycle students, and covers all three years of the students' 1st cycle programme – BA1, BA2 and BA3, with a total weighting of 8 ECTS.

1.2 Range of languages studied

The *Plan Langues - FSA* involves the teaching of English. This choice reflects the role of English in the students' academic field, and also the importance of this language in terms of international mobility in both academic and professional terms. Indeed, English is the working language of a considerable number of future employers of FSA graduates within Belgium, both international and Belgian companies.

However, certain possibilities exist for the learning of Dutch, as well as for mobility programmes in countries with other languages (cf. 3.1; 3.3; 4.4, below).

1.3 Learning outcomes

In achievement terms, the goals of the *Plan Langues* launched in the academic year 2005-06 were defined with respect to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), with B1 as the target level (cf. 3.1; 3.2, below).

Learning outcomes are cross-defined in terms of skills and domain of use. The target skills are reading, listening, writing, and speaking. They are developed in close connection with students' present academic needs and the requirements of their future professional life. These objectives are explicitly related to the increasingly global nature of the economy and to the importance of graduates being prepared to operate effectively in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

The main learning outcomes targeted are:

- Students' ability to understand lectures and to take notes in their specialist domain;
- Students' ability to understand specialist written material in English relating to their specialist domain;
- Students' ability to write coherent textual material in English in their specialist domain, and to express themselves clearly and coherently in the spoken language on academically and professionally relevant topics.

1.4 Practical implementation

As in the other *Plan Langues* faculties, the *Plan Langues – FSA* involves obligatory and ECTS-credited courses taught by ULB staff, as well as access to remedial courses offered by the *Fondation 9*. The structure of the obligatory ECTS-credited component is as follows (http://www.ulb.ac.be/facs/polytech/plan_langues.html):

- BA1: 2 ECTS – Listening to lectures and note-taking;
- BA2: 2 ECTS – Reading for academic purposes;
- BA3: 4 ECTS – Speaking and writing for academic purposes. This course involves 2 ECTS of *Travaux personnels* (Personal Work) relating to the preparation of a personal project linked to students' domain of study.

Teaching is conducted in groups of 25-30 students. Groups are organised on the basis of students' level in English, and attendance is obligatory. The teaching-learning materials as well as testing materials and formats are linked to students' specialist domain. The approach to course design and materials development is thus an example of EAP / pre-experience ESP.

In addition, students are strongly advised to take the diagnostic test DIALANG (<http://www.dialang.org/english/index.htm>) in English prior to registering in their first year. Those who have results at A2 level or below are recommended to undertake remedial work. Students take a ULB level test in BA1 before the beginning of classes which both informs them of their current level in English and also serves to place students in homogeneous class groups.

NB. The FSA is the only administrative unit of the ULB which has an admission examination. This examination is based on mathematics (a key enabling competence in applied science). This means that a degree of pre-selection is in place. This explains why failure rates in BA1 in the FSA are lower than in most other administrative units of the ULB. Furthermore, although there is no necessary link between competence in mathematics and competence in English, average levels in this language in the FSA are higher than in most other administrative units of the ULB. These factors explain why the language teaching programme of the FSA starts in BA1 whereas in the other *Plan Langues* faculties teaching begins only in BA2.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATIVE

2.1 Context

The general context of the *Plan Langues – FSA* is essentially the same as that of the other *Plan Langues* faculties. However, certain differences do exist. One, as already indicated, is that entry levels in English are on average somewhat higher than in most other administrative units of the ULB: relatively few students enter with levels in English above A2. However, positive action in the language field remains a necessity as few students have achieved the target level of B1. Another difference is that the decision to study applied science is seen as being a positive choice which is generally linked to a clear professional motivation. The specific employment domains open to FSA graduates are varied, but employment prospects are above average; furthermore, studying at the FSA has a certain cachet of elite within Belgian society. Finally, the FSA embraced the adoption of the Bologna Process in an energetic and creative manner, with specific reference to academic mobility and to employability.

Thus, while the context for the implementation of the *Plan Langues* in the FSA does not differ in a radical manner from that in the other *Plan Langues* faculties, certain favourable factors do exist, in terms of students' initial levels in the language, a more pronounced degree of professional orientation, and strong faculty support for the development of professionally relevant multilingual and multicultural competences.

2.2 Strategic goals of the initiative

The strategic objectives of the *Plan Langues – FSA* do not differ radically from those pursued in other *Plan Langues* faculties, except with respect to an explicitly stated commitment to the development of multilingual and multicultural competences. The strategic objectives of the *Plan Langues – FSA* are:

- Maintaining language competences acquired at school;
- Enhancing students' language skills to a workable and practically relevant level within the framework of their broader academic training;
- Enabling students to gain access to academic material in their field of specialisation in both the spoken and the written language;
- Promotion of students' employability;
- Promotion of students' mobility in both academic and professional fields;
- Development of multilingual and multicultural competences relevant to the European and international workplace

3. SUCCESS INDICATORS

3.1 Creation of a coherently structured 1st cycle programme

Prior to the launch of the *Plan Langues – FSA*, students in the FSA had a short 2 ECTS course in academic reading in their first year. The *Plan Langues* set in place a coherently structured programme which provides all students of the faculty with language courses throughout their 1st cycle programme. The student numbers following English courses in 2006-07 were:

- BA1: 345
- BA2: 322
- BA3: 232
- Total: **899**

As mentioned previously, all students take a test in the first semester of BA1 which informs them of their level in the target language (English) and allowed for the constitution of homogeneous class groups. Students in MA2 may also take an advanced course in English for Specific Academic Purposes, and 14 students took this course in 2006-07. Motivation for the English language courses offered is high.

In 2006-07, 64 FSA students attended the remedial courses in English organised by the *Fondation 9* within the broader framework of the *Plan Langues* at ULB level. A further 28 attended parallel remedial courses in Dutch at the *Fondation 9*, even though this language was not on their programme. (The number of students attending the *Fondation 9* courses is fairly limited, timetabling difficulties being at least a partial explanation of this phenomenon.)

3.2 Achievement levels

The academic year 2006-07 marked the completion of the first full *Plan Langues* cycle. At its launch, the target achievement level was set at B1 minimum in the four skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. End-of year examinations demonstrated that **85% of FSA students had achieved or exceeded this level**. On this basis, the FSA has revised its target level upwards to B1+ n all 4 skills, with the ultimate goal of B2.

3.3 Uptake of other language contact and intercultural opportunities

The case study focuses on the *Plan Langues* as implemented in the FSA. Nevertheless, this needs to be set within the context of the faculty's vision of languages and intercultural competences as part of the broader academic and professional training it offers to its students. A number of initiatives merit consideration in this respect.

3.3.1 Academic mobility programmes

As part of its broader strategic goals (cf. 2.2, above), the FSA has set up an extensive programme of academic exchanges <http://www.ulb.ac.be/facs/polytech/echanges.html>, and students are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of these opportunities. Exchanges are possible in the 3rd and 4th years (a 2-year exchange), in the 4th year (a 1-year exchange, and as of the academic year 2008-09 also a 1-semester exchange), and in the 5th year (a 1-semester or a 1-year exchange). The FSA's Erasmus partner network embraces 48 institutions in 18 different countries. It also has academic exchange agreements with institutions in the USA, Canada, and China. In 2006-07, a

total of 42 FSA students took advantage of these agreements to spend between one semester and two years in another institution.

- **Exchange agreement with the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel***

The FSA also has an exchange agreement with the ULB's Dutch-speaking sister university, the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*. (In this respect, it is relevant to point out that Dutch plays a key role in employment within Belgium, especially in fields such as civil engineering. The possibility to follow part of their study programme at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* thus allows students to develop competences in Dutch, and thus to enhance their employment prospects on the Belgian workplace.) In the academic year 2006-07, 29 students and in 2007-08 27 students participated in this programme.

- **TIME (Top Industrial Managers for Europe)**

The FSA is a founder member of the network TIME <http://www.ulb.ac.be/polytech/faculte/etudes/echanges/time.html>, which gathers together 51 leading schools of engineering (48 within and 3 outside Europe). Participation in TIME programmes allows students to spend between one semester and two years in another institution and, on this basis, to receive a joint degree, awarded by the ULB and the host institution. Admission to the TIME programme is reserved for students who have demonstrated above average academic achievement. In the academic year 2006-07 13 students, and in 2007-08 10 students participated in this programme.

- **MA programmes in collaboration with the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel***

There are projects underway to establish joint MA programmes with the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, and one was set up in 2007-08, teaching being conducted in both English and French.

3.3.2 Work placements

The FSA has set up a network of work placements, both within Belgium and internationally. These work placements are of 3 months duration at the start of MA2, and frequently involve students working in a language other than French. In 2006-07, 34 students were involved in work placements, of which 2 were outside of Belgium (UK and Thailand); in 2007-08, 58 students were involved in work placements, of which 8 were outside of Belgium (Canada, Chile, France, Luxembourg, Spain, and the UAE). Students' performance during their work placement is closely monitored, including in terms of their linguistic and communicative skills.

3.3.3 BEST (Board of European Students of Technology)

The FSA participates in BEST <http://best.bepolytech.be/>, a student organisation which organises a variety of courses and competitions in the field of applied science and technology. Participation in BEST events places FSA students in an international context, and frequently entails the use of languages other than French.

Uptake of these various language contact and intercultural opportunities has no intrinsic link with *the Plan Langues – FSA* as such. Nevertheless, they reflect the widespread acceptance among FSA students of the international dimension to their academic and professional training. Furthermore, the *Plan Langues - FSA* courses provide an essential basis in terms of students' practical linguistic competences in English.

4. SUCCESS FACTORS

The information given in sections 3.1 and 3.2 indicates that the *Plan Langues – FSA* has been a success in terms of the number of students following and completing a coherently structured 1st cycle language programme, and also in attaining or exceeding the achievement targets set at the launch of the initiative. Furthermore, the uptake of other language contact and intercultural learning opportunities points to a broader level of success. Indeed, in this respect, it is not easy to distinguish between success indicators and success factors: this point, however, will be discussed in 4.4, below.

4.1 Presence of a clear and explicitly stated faculty “vision” or *projet professionnel*

The FSA offers academic programmes which have a strong professional orientation. Furthermore, the faculty explicitly emphasises the need for its students and graduates to acquire multilingual and multicultural competences in order for them to be able to operate effectively in the current European and international workplace. In this way, the specifics of the *Plan Langues – FSA* language programme are lived out within a faculty context which is supportive to the goals of the language programme within the broader framework of students' academic and professional training.

4.2 Faculty support

The FSA is a relatively small and cohesive faculty where collaboration among teaching staff is frequent. This creates a supportive context for the language teaching team to discuss matters with content lecturers and thus to integrate the language courses meaningfully into students' broader academic programme. For example, BA1 and BA2, students have a year-round project and their abstract must be written in English. A scientific seminar is also given in the framework of their English language course by a member of the FSA academic staff. Furthermore in the BA3 oral examination, students are assessed jointly by a language teacher and member of the academic staff of FSA.. Indeed, the assessment of students' BA3 oral examination combines the use of the CEFR in terms of students' language competence, with a parallel evaluation of the academic content of the project on which the examination is based. These various actions reinforce the integration of language and academic competences, and thus serves to enhance student motivation. Furthermore as numerous courses at the MA level are taught in English, great interest is shown by the Faculty, in the construction of a coherent and integrated language program at BA level.

4.3 Presence of a clear *projet pédagogique* at faculty level

The FSA has a clear *projet pédagogique* (pedagogical policy or vision). This is manifested in the presence of a pedagogical support unit with 2.5 full-time staff, the *Bureau d'appui pédagogique en Polytech* (BAPP <http://www.bapp.ulb.ac.be/>). It has also given rise to the creation of a *référentiel de compétences* (<http://www.ulb.ac.be/facs/polytech/>, under *présentation*), which sets out the competences and learning outcomes targeted by the faculty's academic and professional training. Two of these learning outcomes are:

- The ability to understand and accommodate the impact of interpersonal communication in different contexts: hierarchical relations, cultural differences, conflict situations, etc.
- The ability to provide constructive feedback.

These learning outcomes are not language-specific, but they clearly provide support to the English teaching programme set up under the *Plan Langues – FSA* by placing effective communication on the broader learning agenda of the faculty.

4.4 Promotion of the international dimension

Uptake of the language contact and intercultural learning opportunities outlined in 3.3 above may be seen as success indicators, in that they indicate students' free choice to engage in projects involving contact with other languages and cultures. At the same time, the presence of such opportunities, as well as strong faculty encouragement for students to avail themselves of these opportunities, creates a context conducive to language learning, and may thus equally be seen as a success factor. To summarise, the FSA offers the following main types of language contact and intercultural learning opportunities:

- Academic exchanges;
- Participation in TIME (Top Industrial Managers for Europe);
- Content courses taught in English at MA level;
- Work placements;
- Participation in BEST (Board of European Students of Technology).

It may be relevant to point out that participation in some of these activities is not compulsory, but by students free choice. Furthermore, in certain cases, participation is linked to academic success, making these opportunities a reward for commitment rather than an obligation.

5. LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

5.1 Lessons to be learned at institutional level

The *Plan Langues – FSA* is one realisation of the broader *Plan Langues* launched by the ULB from the academic year 2005-06. Not surprisingly, therefore, the lessons which can be learned at institutional level from the *Plan Langues - FSA* case study share common ground with those which can be derived from the broader *Plan Langues* initiative.

5.1.1 Strong faculty support

As already indicated, the FSA is a small, cohesive faculty, and the practical implementation of the *Plan Langues* has received strong support from a variety of faculty actors. This has

contributed significantly to the success of the initiative, and points to the importance of institutional / faculty support in the practical realisation of a language initiative.

5.1.2 Linking of language learning to students' mainstream academic programme and future professional goals

The language teaching materials and assessment formats developed within the *Plan Langues – FSA*, as in the other *Plan Langues* faculties, reflect the students' academic disciplines, and thus are a manifestation of EAP / pre-experience ESP. In addition to this, however, the specifics of the *Plan Langues – FSA* courses were lived out within a supportive context provided by the clear and explicitly stated *projet professionnel* of the FSA as a whole. This relates to the strong professional orientation of FSA programmes and, in particular, to the importance given at faculty level to the development of multilingual and multicultural communicative competences in response to the requirements of the European and international workplace.

5.1.3 Presence of a range of language contact and intercultural learning opportunities

The various language contact and intercultural learning opportunities outlined in 3.3 are a practical manifestation of the importance the FSA accords to the development of multilingual and multicultural communicative competences. Furthermore, they create a framework of opportunity which reinforces learners' awareness of the long-term role of the language programme developed within the framework of the *Plan Langues – FSA*. These opportunities, combined with the *Plan Langues* language programme, contribute to the creation of a positive attitude to and motivation for language learning. These two initiatives (the *Plan Langues – FSA* and the other language contact and intercultural learning opportunities made available to students) are thus mutually supportive, and reinforce one another on the motivational level.

5.1.4 The obligatory nature of language learning

Despite the positive remarks made above, it would be unhelpful to underestimate the efforts which were made by the language teaching team to make the *Plan Langues – FSA* initiative a success. As in other *Plan Langues* faculties, this has involved ongoing adaptation of the teaching-learning materials and assessment formats, as well as energetic advocacy as to the role of language learning in students' academic and professional training. *Plan Langues – FSA* courses are an obligatory component of students' academic programme, and attendance is obligatory. At the current point in time at least, this would seem to be a further success factor. Especially in the 1st and 2nd years of their programme, not all students have a clear vision of their future career and thus of the role of languages. Making languages obligatory sends out a clear message in this respect. It also ensures that all students have at least the basic linguistic and communicative skills that will enable them to take advantage of the other language contact and intercultural learning opportunities which the FSA makes available to them from their 3rd year of study.

5.2 Broader implications

The broader implications of the present case study are relatively clear.

5.2.1 Language learning for its own sake is unlikely to be enough

Perhaps the single most decisive factor in this case study is the integration of the *Plan Langues – FSA* initiative into the broader academic and professional training of the students concerned. The FSA does not require its students to learn a language for its own sake, but rather as a means for them to be able to take advantage of a range of other academic opportunities, and to be able to operate effectively within their future professional life. It is within this broader framework of goals that the specificities of the *Plan Langues – FSA* assume their relevance and thus their motivational value for students.

5.2.2 The crucial role of strong institutional / faculty support

As already indicated, *the Plan Langues – FSA* is part of a shared, faculty-level vision of the goals of the academic and professional training offered to students. In this way it has received strong faculty support on a number of levels. This factor merits serious consideration in the launching, evaluation, and consolidation of language initiatives.

True, within the context of the FSA, the content of teaching-learning materials, as well as the additional language contact and intercultural learning opportunities made available to students are all geared around the academic and professional training of students of applied science. In other contexts, so close a link between language learning / contact opportunities and students' academic programme might not be necessary, but this is a tactical rather than a strategic question. At the *Freie Universität Berlin*, for example, students are offered the possibility to study languages within a more general framework of employability, and the specifics of their language programme are not necessarily linked to their mainstream academic orientation. The underlying principle, however, remains the same, namely that language learning be presented to students within the broader framework of their education as effective and linguistically empowered young professionals in the Europe of the 21st century. The success of specific language initiatives, whatever their nature, is likely to depend on how closely these initiatives are linked into a broader “vision” of the ultimate goals of the students' higher education programme.