

**CONSEIL EUROPÉEN POUR LES LANGUES / EUROPEAN
LANGUAGE COUNCIL (CEL/ELC)
ENLU – European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning
Among all Undergraduates
Project carried out under European Commission's Call for Proposals
EAC/45/03 of 31 July 2003¹**

This paper seeks to set out the key policy developments and practical steps that have been undertaken at a European level since the early 90's, upon which the ENLU project has been built.

Background

Both the Council of Europe² and the European Commission have for a long time urged public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide facilities for the continuation of language learning by all students in higher education. A milestone in this respect was the Commission's *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* of December 1991 (COM (91) 349 final), which "focussed ... on languages for the generality of students and on the necessity for comprehensive institutional policies with regard to language provision", emphasising that it was essential that students be supported in maintaining and extending their language skills. Among the concrete measures proposed were

- the provision of language courses accompanying other disciplines;
- the provision of supplementary learning, including self-instruction, facilities;
- the teaching of portions of courses through the medium of Community foreign languages;
- the use of postgraduate students from other Member States as teaching assistants;
- the provision of a wide range of languages, including lesser-used and lesser-taught languages.

The ideas put forward by the Commission were taken up and elaborated by the *SIGMA Scientific Committee on Languages* (12/1994-10/1995), which proposed that non-language students should also be given credits for successfully completed language work. They were subsequently expanded in the thematic network projects that followed upon SIGMA³ and by the CEL/ELC founded in 1997. Of particular relevance was the work undertaken by sub-project 8 of the first Thematic Network Project (TNP) in the area of languages, which was devoted to *Language Studies for Students of Other Disciplines*. It specifically focused on quality issues such as the organisation of language teaching in HEIs, the use of common levels of competence across Europe, a professional qualifications profile for HE language teachers, the linguistic needs of the labour market, and the linguistic implications of student mobility.

While there can be no doubt that a number of HEIs across Europe implemented some of the recommendations made, it has to be admitted that "languages for all" remains an area for development, and this for a number of different reasons:

- until recently, most universities in Europe saw it as their main task to produce and transmit knowledge, rather than to develop skills and competences; as a result, language learning and teaching were regarded as being the business of school education and specialist faculties rather than of higher education in general
- in spite of a steady increase in student mobility, most universities throughout the nineties remained national / regional institutions and did not develop a European or international ethos
- in a number of countries, motivation for language learning among students remained low or was limited to English

¹ A list of the projects supported under this call is available at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/calls/languages/selection.pdf>

² Cf. Recommendation No. R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States Concerning Modern Languages, notably Appendix C.7.

³ Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages (TNP) (1996-1999); Project for the Exploitation and Dissemination of the Results and Outcomes of the Thematic Network (TNP-D) (1999-2000); Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages II (TNP2) (2000-2003) (information about these projects and about SIGMA is available at www.fu-berlin.de/elc/); Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III (TNP3) (2003-2006) (www.fu-berlin.de/tnp3/).

- in countries and HEIs where student motivation was high, demand more often than not outstripped supply

In sum, while the languages community in higher education became increasingly convinced of the need to promote the learning of a wide range of foreign languages among HE students, and while there is now a host of pertinent recommendations to this effect, we have yet to achieve a breakthrough on a wide front in terms of both the number of students learning languages and the range of languages offered.

Recent developments – a new climate

Since the end of the nineties, there have been a number of new developments which have created more favourable conditions for the development and implementation of “languages-for-all” policies – in fact have made “languages for all” a matter of considerable urgency.

- The Bologna Process has put the European dimensions of higher education and of the employability of graduates on the HE agenda; these issues cannot be addressed without giving proper attention to language learning among the student body in general, and among undergraduates in particular.
- Since the Lisbon Summit of March 2000, the overarching importance of education for life and work in the knowledge society has become a key issue of EU policy (cf. the Objectives Process⁴). Significantly, foreign languages have been put at the top of the list of the new basic skills regarded as indispensable for achieving economic progress and social cohesion in the Union.
- Both the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy are underpinned by two political aims that directly call for renewed efforts in the area of languages in higher education: encouraging lifelong learning, and increasing the mobility of the workforce.
- There is growing awareness of the importance of skills and competences among the qualifications required of graduates on the labour market (cf. the Tuning Project⁵).
- Modularisation and credit accumulation facilitate the incorporation of non-subject-specific offerings, such as languages, into courses of study, particularly at first-cycle level.

Some of these developments were focussed on by the Berlin European Year of Languages 2001 Conference, the only major EYL2001 event specifically devoted to the HE sector. The Berlin Declaration released at the time of the Conference forcefully stressed the urgent need for “languages-for-all” policies and practices.

Multilingual competence, high levels of communicative competence in a number of languages, and language learning ability are becoming essential aspects of a European graduate’s employability, citizenship and personal development. Universities must provide students, regardless of their field of specialisation, with opportunities for improving their knowledge in languages, for learning new languages, and for becoming more independent in their language learning.

The concrete measures proposed to this end echoed recommendations made before. However, in urging universities to offer all students in undergraduate education the opportunity to take a number of credits in languages and in demanding that language competence acquired through mobility should be assessed and certified, the Declaration introduced a new tone of seriousness. Moreover, the Declaration called on universities to develop their own coherent and specific language policies, covering the fields of education, research and development.

Through the Conference, the issues of “languages for all” and of university language policy gained unprecedented momentum – at European, national, and institutional levels. The CEL/ELC itself launched a pilot project under the name *European University Language Policy Interest Group* (2001-2003), in which nine member universities were represented by their vice rectors/vice presidents responsible for education and by language experts. The discussions conducted by the group have

⁴ Council of the European Union (Education). 2002. Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of Education and training systems in Europe. Official Journal of the European Communities C 141/1. 14.6.2002
http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/2002/c_142/c_14220020614en00010022.pdf

⁵ For information in the Tuning Project see the Final Report of Tuning I, available at the Tuning Project website
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm>

since led to the adoption or preparation of “languages for all undergraduates” policies in a number of participating institutions.

On a wider level, the Commission included specific sections on language learning in higher education in its Consultation Document on *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity* of November 2002 (SEC(2002) 1234) and in its Action Plan of the same title of July 2003 (COM(2003) 449 final). Both sections echo the Berlin Declaration and introduce as a new idea the recommendation that all students should gain an accepted language qualification as part of their degree course. (In this context, it is worth remembering that the Commission has now adopted an inclusive approach; linguistic diversity not only relates to the official EU languages, but also to regional and non-EU languages.) Along similar lines, higher education ministers meeting in Berlin in September 2003 stressed the necessity of ensuring proper provision for linguistic diversity and language learning, thereby including language learning and linguistic diversity in the Bologna agenda.

In this respect, it is important that both the European University Association and The National Union of Students in Europe fully support these policies and that a number of national rectors’ conferences have come out in favour of the provision of language learning opportunities for all undergraduates.

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