

Multilingualism in the knowledge-based society

Building bridges for innovation in higher, policies, and research

TNP3 Closing Conference
Université Rennes 2, 22-23 September 2006

Introductory remarks by Wolfgang Mackiewicz

The sub-theme of this Conference – “Building bridges for innovation in higher education, policies, and research” – reflects one of the principal aims of our current Thematic Network project: to pave the way for systematic consultation and collaboration between universities and key stakeholders in other sectors of education and in the social, economic and professional environments.

TNP3 as part of a ten-year tradition of collaboration in the area of languages

Of course, consultation and collaboration with educational and non-educational stakeholders is not something that we invented, nor is it something that we had never considered and concerned ourselves with before the launch of our third full-fledged TNP. For one thing, the establishment of links between higher education institutions on the one hand and schools and employers on the other was one of the declared aims underlying the foundation of the Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council. For another, a number of sub-projects in our first Thematic Network project conducted meetings and workshops with employers as well as surveys among employers, students and graduates in order to gain a clearer understanding of the linguistic and intercultural demands on the labour market with the aim of bringing higher education provision more into line with those demands. These endeavours were further highlighted in the one-year dissemination network project conducted in 1999-2000, for which we prepared policy-oriented synthesis reports on themes such as “The needs of the labour market”, “Training in translation and interpreting”, and “Language studies at advanced level for non-language professionals”. **In this way, we sought to respond to one of the principal aims of TNPs in general: to overcome the frequently observed disconnection of higher education programmes and provision from changing needs in the non-academic environments.**

Policy context

Of course, consultation and collaboration between higher education institutions and educational and non-educational stakeholders have since received added importance as a result of Bologna and Lisbon.

- The Bologna Declaration of 1999 stated that the degree awarded after the first cycle should be relevant to the European labour market.
- The Prague Communiqué of 2001 spoke of the need to develop study programmes that combine academic excellence with relevance to lasting employability.
- The Lisbon European Council expressed the view that Europe’s education and training systems needed to adapt to the demands of the knowledge society and knowledge economy and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. In other words, education and training were seen as being directly relevant to the European economy and to employability.

Whether as a result of these policies or because of a general change in climate in higher education, it is certainly the case that there is a marked trend in Europe towards consultation and collaboration between higher education institutions on the one hand and employers and institutions belonging to other sectors of education on the other – and this at various levels. Looking back, we can see that when we defined the aims of TNP3 in autumn 2002, we must have sensed these winds of change.

For completeness' sake, let me just remind you that language learning assumed a new level of importance in the context of both Bologna and Lisbon. Under Lisbon, it became one of the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning. For us as members of the higher education languages community this confirmed what we had always thought to be the case – that multilingual communicative skills and competences were important for Europe's economic success and for employability, and that universities and employers would be well advised to enter into a dialogue about current and future needs in this field.

Consultation and collaboration – a long-term prospect

Of course, when we set ourselves the aim of bringing about “close and systematic consultation and co-operation” between universities and other key stakeholders, we did not expect that we would be able to achieve this at a stroke. National and institutional variations apart, it is certainly the case that universities and employers tend to view each other with suspicion. The same holds true for universities and schools. This is why the activities we have undertaken over the past three years should perhaps first and foremost be seen as measures designed to raise awareness among all concerned. To give a few concrete examples –

- in preparing the national reports, we were led – many of us perhaps for the first time – to investigate pertinent developments in our national economies and in the language industries; we were encouraged to seek to find sources of information about these developments and to consult with people in industry; we made every effort to gather information about new professional demands and new professional profiles as well as about new linguistic demands in the public and private sectors; we became interested in existing contacts and cooperation between universities and employers and in the work of career services. In other words, colleagues and hopefully institutions and organisations involved in our TNP gained heightened awareness of the need regularly to adapt provision in the area of languages to current and anticipated future demands and of ways in which pertinent information could be obtained.
- through our contacts with employers, at least some people outside universities become aware of our initiative and, to the best of my knowledge, came to appreciate that we, too, meant business.
- in preparing the synthesis reports we became aware of both general trends and of national and regional differences.
- through our national and synthesis reports it was again brought home to us that there are considerable differences between individual companies – let alone regions and member States – and that because of this, we should focus on key competences, both for language professionals and for non-language professionals.
- in designing the questionnaires for the consultation for sub-project two, we identified and described fifteen work-related situations of foreign language

use; in this way both we, the experts, and the responding employers and graduates reached a clearer understanding of the need to develop action-oriented linguistic and intercultural skills and competences required for mastering these situations; what we still have to do is to identify and describe these very skills and competences and to reflect on methods of teaching, learning and assessment appropriate to these skills and competences. Fortunately, we won't have to start from scratch; fortunately we have the skill-specific proficiency levels of the Council of Europe, which we can develop in accordance with academic and professional requirements.

- by almost exclusively referring to sub-projects 1 and 2 so far, I did not wish to imply that dialogue between universities and institutions and organisations in and authorities responsible for the other sectors of education is less important; quite the opposite is the case; after all, if lifelong language learning is not to remain a mere slogan, we shall have to build bridges which allow learners to move from one sector of education to another. But there is more to it, and it is through work in sub-project three that we became more fully aware of the many reasons why consultation and collaboration between, for example, higher education and school education is needed.

The consultation – its limitations and potential

The consultation we conducted last year and earlier this year, the outcomes of which will figure prominently at this Conference, has been an exercise in awareness raising as well. We devoted a substantial amount of time to designing the five questionnaires used in the consultation. In this, we were at least partly guided by the expectation that through the consultation we would be able to obtain reliable information not otherwise available. It has been clear to us for quite some time now that this expectation was somewhat unrealistic. Our samples were too small and there was uneven geographical spread – to mention just two limiting factors. However, the identification of specific trends apart, I think there are a number of aspects that point in the direction of future activities to be considered.

- True, enterprises in Europe, including SMEs and micro enterprises, are increasingly becoming international. However, this is also true of our graduates, many of whom seek and find their first employment abroad. In other words, there is every reason why surveys conducted among graduates at institutional or national level should include questions regarding linguistic and intercultural skills and competences.
- Consultations targeted at employers can probably only scratch the surface. If we want to find out more about the language needs of employers – and graduates, for that matter – we need studies involving interviews and site visits.
- Even if our questionnaires targeted at employers had been more professionally designed than they were, the responses received would still – to some extent at least - have reflected individual perceptions rather than real language use, let alone future demands. This is why we need research projects in which universities and employers co-operate with each other. This is one of the reasons why in TNP3, for the first time, we are going to make proposals for research projects. The same, by the way, is also true for collaboration between universities and the other sectors of education.
- Ultimately, we shall have to reflect on which issues had best be addressed through consultation and collaboration at local or regional level and which

issues can best be dealt with at a European level, which structures should be put in place, and to what end and how these structures and processes should become linked to each other. I am confident that the Conference will generate some concrete recommendations in this respect.

I think that what I have just said will have made it clear that quite a lot has been achieved over the past three years, but that at this Conference we will not be able to deliver a number of neatly packaged, finished products, as it were. This Conference is still very much about work in progress.

Before I conclude, I should like mention just a few more points.

- (i) One of the most positive experiences of TNP3 has been the pilot project “Short-term student mobility”. In my opening remarks at the Copenhagen Conference a year ago, I expressed the view that the presence of students from ESIB, from the Erasmus Student Network and from a number of schools of translation and interpretation would have a profound impact on our deliberations. In fact, such was the impact that the members of the various working groups wanted to involve the students in all activities planned for Year Three. Alas, this was not foreseen in the project proposal and budget. I am all the more grateful, that at this Conference, too, we have a substantial contingent of students – in fact, we have even more students than last time. May I take this opportunity to thank the European Commission for their generous support of the short-term student mobility initiative, ESIB and ESN and the T&I schools involved for their co-operation, you, the students for your willingness to participate in this Conference, and Karen Lauridsen for again co-ordinating the pilot experience.
- (ii) Among the TNP3 deliverables envisaged is what we have come to call a European virtual consortium of stakeholders. At present, this consortium only exists on paper. I should like to call on all of you to contact, over the next few weeks, those stakeholders who you contacted in connection with the preparation of your national reports and the consultation. We are keen to keep up the momentum – especially in view of the dissemination network project due to start on 1 October, which envisages no fewer than four decentralised and one centralised conference within the time span of a few months. In your Conference folder, you will find short questionnaires designed to invite stakeholders to join one of the three fora of the consortium currently envisaged. I should be grateful if you could discuss and maybe revise the forms in your groups.
- (iii) This is not just the TNP3 Closing Conferences. The Rennes Conference marks the tenth anniversary of the start of European university cooperation in the area of languages. During those ten years a large number of original and important recommendations have been developed and put forward – many of which, such as the idea that every university should develop and implement its own institutional language policy, are now widely accepted. However, it is to be expected that people will ask us what concrete improvements and innovations in higher education programmes and provision have come about as a result of our projects. This is why in the dissemination network project we are going to present not only our

recommendations and proposals, but also case studies that demonstrate that our TNPs have had an impact.

- (iv) Our TNP is in some respects like a large European family. This is why I feel very sad indeed that several members of our TNP family have been unable to join us in Rennes due to illness. I feel particularly sad that Kari Sajavaara, who was a member of the legendary SIGMA Committee, has been prevented from travelling by very serious indisposition. I am sure you will all wish to join me in sending Kari our best wishes for a speedy recovery.

During the course of the Conference, there will be many occasions for thanking the Université Rennes 2 in general and Daniel Toudic and his team in particular for organising and supporting this Conference. At this point, I should just like to thank the Research Council of Rennes 2 University, the Brittany Regional Council, the Conseil Général d'Ille et Vilaine and, last but not least, the City of Rennes for their generous sponsorship of this event. I should like to add that we are immensely grateful for the warm reception extended to us here today. For many in this room, this is the second European conference devoted to higher education language studies held in France this year. We are immensely pleased to have the opportunity to get to know yet another city and region of this country – a country which has done so much to make the erstwhile dream of a united Europe come true.

THANK YOU!