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Multilingualism - can we overcome the gap between principle and reality?

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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Multilingualism - between principles and reality

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to visit the *Freie Universität Berlin*, a university with a special place in the history of freedom in Europe. The motto "truth, justice and liberty" which is enshrined in your founding tradition has shaped your history for more than 60 years.

In just six decades, you have gone from strength to strength, earning 'Excellenz' status and a superb international reputation. Your work in developing European cooperation in languages underscores your leading role in developing European and international cooperation in higher education in general.

I am therefore very pleased to be here for a debate on a topic that is dear to me and, I believe, crucial for Europe - how to motivate Europeans to learn foreign languages. **Your expertise and fresh ideas will certainly help me implement my policy for multilingualism in the European Union.**

A new European strategy for multilingualism

As you know, last September I issued a new strategy for multilingualism in Europe. Because I am convinced that knowledge of languages benefits Europeans. A successful multilingualism policy can strengthen citizens' life chances: it can boost job prospects. It can open up access to rights and services. It can bring about a Europe of solidarity, because it creates paths to dialogue between people and cultures, laying the basis for strong and unified local communities.

Our languages are our primary means for expressing ourselves, our identities and our cultures. But they are also our single most important bridge towards others, towards understanding and exchange. They are an instrument for mutual respect.

Approached in this spirit, linguistic diversity is a precious asset, increasingly so in today's globalised world.

However, just as knowledge of languages is an enormous asset, the other side of the coin is also true – without good language policies, our linguistic diversity can be an obstacle that prevents citizens from taking advantage of the European freedoms to live, work, study or trade in another Member State.

In fact, lack of other languages is the most common reason that holds people back from living this aspect of the 'European dream'. Lack of knowledge of the national language is also a serious obstacle for migrants trying to integrate into a new society.

This is why my Communication proposes strategic measures so everyone can benefit from the advantages of multilingualism. And why we intend to mainstream multilingualism across the European policies that are intertwined with languages: lifelong learning, employment, social inclusion, competitiveness, culture, youth and civil society, research and media – to name just a selection!

Good practices in language learning – the role of universities

In a Europe that lays more stress on multilingualism, your university is an excellent example of integrating languages into higher education. I look forward to discussing some of your initiatives in more detail later.

Universities have a crucial part in creating a Europe of knowledge. This goes for languages as for any other field, where universities have enormous cultural and technological knowledge to share with society.

It is crucial that universities fill this role fully - providing language tuition, offering courses in "language industries" and cooperating at European and international level to attain and maintain standards of excellence in teaching and research.

Freie Universität Berlin is pioneering a commitment to languages that could help transform language learning in higher education if applied more widely. Your good practices deserve to be widely circulated.

For example, the University Language Centre has had great success in attracting international students and greatly contributes to your overall excellence.

I know that your new bachelor programmes offering a wide range of foreign languages - from Arabic to Turkish, from Polish to Portuguese, and from Dutch to Italian - are an enormous success with students. You are leading the field, by equipping **students with strong language skills regardless of their specialisation.**

I am also glad to know that in this university students opt for this variety of languages instead of just targeting English alone. As you know, one of my main concerns is how to motivate our citizens to learn languages other than English in order to safeguard and promote the EU's wealth of languages.

Your approach makes economic sense too. As more and more individuals master English, English alone will not be enough for job success. It is the second, or third language, that will interest employers. And here I include world languages as well, and I register your success in including these in the curriculum.

Another innovation of this university is your cooperation with schools in the region. This initiative could be a way to spread awareness of linguistic diversity at local and regional level and motivate young people to learn foreign languages.

EU-university cooperation for boosting multilingualism

Your decision to invest in teaching and learning a wide range of foreign languages, and to make languages an integral part of curricula, of course calls for human and financial resources. I am glad to say that the European Commission has co-funded a number of European projects coordinated by the Freie Universität Berlin.

The European Commission co-finances the MOLAN network you are coordinating under the Key Activity Languages of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme.

Learning foreign languages requires time and effort. It also requires motivation – and we still don't know enough about this area - how best to motivate people, and young people especially, to learn languages?

This is what the MOLAN project is all about: to discover what motivates language learning and share good practices. This vast network stretching across 19 countries will unearth, and more importantly, circulate good ideas across Europe.

Providing language teachers with a good start

Another area where we must keep improving is in training language teachers. Language teachers are key people - as was acknowledged by Europe's Education and Culture Ministers at their ministerial meeting in Brussels last May. They are key, not only because they impart language skills to their students, but because they help young people develop the intercultural skills for life in our increasingly diverse Europe.

Language teachers should spend time abroad to improve fluency in the languages they teach and sharpen their intercultural skills. However, as you know, few teachers actually have the opportunity to do this. We must find ways of overcoming the obstacles: difficulties in finding teaching jobs abroad; lack of career incentives, or even career penalties; and, last but not least, over-rigid mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral exchanges.

At European Union level we use our funding programmes to support teacher training and mobility. But there is an effort to be made by Member States too, in making it easier and more attractive to spend training time abroad both as part of studies and of working life.

We must also look at how - and where - we teach languages, to see how we can extend our range of methods, looking at more flexible, more personalised, and more informal learning paths. We should be making language-learning more relevant to people's daily lives.

Valuing migrant languages for intercultural dialogue and to boost competitiveness

As I mentioned, multilingualism fosters dialogue and mutual respect. Mastering the language of the host country is a fundamental step for every migrant towards a feeling of really belonging in a society.

Equally, the host country and the learning institution can help develop an atmosphere of mutual respect by placing more value on migrants' languages and cultures. This can also motivate young people to learn new languages and open up to new cultures.

More and more, we see multicultural and multilingual classrooms not just in our cities, but in our towns and villages. This opens up a very rewarding field of research, looking at new ways to foster intercultural dialogue and to promote language learning and linguistic diversity.

EU stakeholder platforms

It might seem to some that multilingualism is about students and teachers. Yes, students and teachers are at the heart of language learning. But effective multilingualism policies call on a wide range of stakeholders – education authorities, of course; regional and local governments; business and professional organisations; academic and research institutions; voluntary organisations and NGOs.

Sharing and spreading information about what works best is a vital part of building consistent, excellent policies for multilingualism.

This is why I will set up two platforms in 2009, to deepen cooperation with language stakeholders. The platform with civil society stakeholders will share ideas and experiences for promoting multilingualism for intercultural dialogue. The permanent platform for the Business community will build on last year's Business and Languages Forum and focus on how to address the mismatch between business needs and education provision.

Conclusion

Just to conclude, let me remind you that this is the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. We want to use this year to create an environment in Europe that recognises innovation and creativity as drivers of economic and social change and as keys that unlock the potential of every citizen.

Multilingualism has its part to play – for example, the links between multilingualism and new technologies open up exciting new possibilities that we must investigate further, since they have potential in all fields of language-learning – whether in an academic setting or in schools; or for the home or adult learner.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My thanks again for this invitation to speak on multilingualism in one of Europe's centres of excellence.

Europe's linguistic diversity is dazzling – 23 official languages, around 60 regional and minority languages and a large number of world languages spoken by migrants.

I look forward very much to hearing your views on making the most of this real natural resource, which we can harness to open up Europe to the world, and to open Europeans to each other.

Thank you.