

Workshop 3: POLICY (Strategy and Quality)

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Within the framework of ENLU, Task Force 1 (Institution-wide Language Policies) had the specific goal of exploring initiatives taken in Higher Education institutions across Europe in the field of language policy development. This plays a particular role within the broader goal structure of ENLU in that, for Higher Education institutions to move towards the objective of providing language learning opportunities for all undergraduates, focused policy decisions are called for. Furthermore, language policy is by no means the norm in Higher Education institutions across Europe. For this reason, Task Force 1 set out to identify benchmarks and develop guidelines for policy development which could serve to support the efforts of institutions seeking to extend language learning to a wider range of students.

The workshop was organised around five focus questions which arose out of the work conducted to date in Task Force 1, and had the specific goal of identifying areas for future action within the framework of the HELP network. The results of the discussion are summarised below per focus question.

1. Which strategies can be adopted at institutional level to initiate reflection and focused action geared to the development of a languages for all policy?

Clear and coherently structured arguments are needed to convince institutions of the need to make the necessary investment in developing a language policy. A key factor here is awareness raising among university management, deans of faculty, and lecturing staff. This derives from the often inadequate awareness of the importance of languages which has been reported from different parts of Europe. Students can play a role in the process of awareness raising since, according to reported experience, they are sometimes more immediately aware of the importance of languages than university and faculty management.

It is crucial that language learning forms an obligatory rather than an optional component of first cycle programmes, which implies that language learning should receive full credit weighting in terms of ECTS. This would reinforce the prestige both of language learning and of language teaching. Needless to say, it is essential that language programmes be designed in response to the real needs of students, both within their academic programme and with respect to their subsequent professional needs.

The role of English needs careful attention. Experience and research show that while a good command of English does play an important role in many fields, an English-only strategy is not adequate to prepare students for the demands of the European labour market. Competence in at least one more foreign language is necessary. The promotion of language learning is by no means a question of ideology, as it has been shown that a lack of foreign language and intercultural communication skills has a negative effect on the business opportunities of companies at an international level.

2. In which way can the programme reforms initiated by Bologna be exploited to argue for and to promote a languages for all policy, in particular at first circle level?

The main question is whether the Bologna Process has really given to languages the role they merit. The importance of language learning is implicit in the Bologna documents: Indeed, the development of the foreign language competence of students is a necessary enabling condition for the effective fulfillment of many of the stated goals of the Bologna process. Furthermore, the Bologna Process promotes competence-based study programmes, and language learning and intercultural communication are crucial to graduates' ability to function effectively in the current academic and professional environment.

The development of mobility programmes such as Erasmus and Leonardo has influenced approximately 10 percent of the European student population, many of the students in question being from the fields of Tourism, Business, International Relations, and Languages. It is precisely these students, however, who often already have a sufficient command of foreign languages. The question is what happens to those students who do not participate in mobility programmes. For such students, language and international communication courses can play an invaluable role in preparing them to operate in international contexts. In addition, incoming international students and lecturers can create an environment at the home university which allows students to gain international experience. For these reasons, it was suggested that lecturer mobility should be encouraged further, and that the possibilities for virtual mobility should also be investigated.

It was also reported that, despite the clear role of languages within the Bologna Process, in practice, languages have sometimes been neglected in curricular reform at first cycle level. This sometimes result from inadequate understanding of the role of languages, as well as from a range of organisational and financial difficulties. Focused advocacy is needed to reinforce the understanding of various institutional actors of the key role of languages in the successful realisation of the Bologna Process.

3. Which structures are most appropriate to the planning and to the practical implementation of a language policy, and how can such structures be set in place and managed?

It was suggested that the setting up of an institution-wide language council involving a range of institutional stakeholders can play a sometimes decisive role in language policy development. The role of such language council would be to plan the language policy, to monitor policy implementation, and to deal with quality issues. This having been said, since institutional structures differ from country to country, constraints of a legal or organisational nature can influence the actions that a university may take. Such questions need to be studied carefully at institutional and/or national level and locally relevant but focused solutions found.

Experience indicates that focused advocacy aimed at senior management is essential to ensure the launch and implementation of a language policy. In this respect, institutional bodies such as the university Senate can play an important role too: The members of such bodies also need to understand and be convinced of the goals and relevance of the language policy. Students can also play an active role in this respect by convincing senior management and the Senate of the importance of languages. The combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies can be particularly effective in promoting language policy development.

Although differences exist across Europe in terms of both the awareness of the role of languages and with respect to the institutional structures most appropriate for policy development and implementation, good communication between institutions and the sharing of information on policy initiatives and examples of good practice is a priority.

4. Which measures can be taken to ensure regular quality monitoring and enhancement, and the long-term anchoring of a language policy in institutional structures?

External quality assessment can play a constructive and supportive role in terms of the development and the long-term anchoring of a language policy. Indeed, the presence of a language policy should be seen as a quality criterion in its own right, and this factor should be integrated into European quality assessment frameworks.

In addition to external quality assessment, however, it is helpful, and indeed necessary, to cater for internal quality assessment of the ongoing implementation of a language policy. This can ensure the continued relevance of language learning initiatives, as well as the long-term anchoring and further development of the policy.

5. In which areas and by which specific measures could the HELP network contribute to the development of language policy at institutional level?

The following initiatives emerged from the workshop as meriting particular attention, and as responding to the needs of persons seeking to set up or consolidate language policy initiatives in their own institution:

- Existing language policy documents which illustrate the way in which a language policy can be articulated, and how such a policy can best be developed, implemented and monitored.
- Recommendations relevant to rectors and to rectors' conferences relating to the rationale for and the strategies which can be adopted to ensure the practical development of a university-wide language policy.
- Documents illustrating instances of good practice in the form of detailed case studies, together with relevant information and practical guidelines for the development and practical realisation of a language policy.
- Organisation of seminars targeting relevant stakeholders, including rectors, on aspects of language policy development.
- Documents providing guidelines for internal quality assessment.

In order for these initiatives to achieve their goals, focused input from colleagues involved in the practical development of language policy in institutions across Europe is essential. This argues for the creation of a broadly represented and dynamic network capable of gathering and disseminating information, and of organising focused consultancy activities.

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