



Network project for the decentralised and centralised dissemination of TNP3 results and outcomes

## **DISSEMINATION DOCUMENT – CHAPTER 2**

### Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labour market

#### **Changes on the labour market**

The European Union is, inevitably, influenced by a range of economic and other forces in the global context as well as by the situation and development of an expanding Union as the EU15 has welcomed new members. Changes in the European labour market reflect the impact of these wider movements as the workforce adapts to meet the needs of changing economic patterns, technological advances and modes of work.

For European countries, the highest proportion of trade continues to be carried out within the EU. The newer EU countries have experienced a growth in EU trade (as was earlier the case for EU15 countries) since they joined the Union. However, in addition to this intra-European trade, there is also a sizeable volume of trade with countries outside the union which is for a number of members very substantial and represents in all cases an important source of wealth creation as well as a potential growth area.

In a globalised world, companies and investments cross national boundaries to reach the locations perceived as most advantageous to them whatever their sphere of activity and whatever the size of the organisation (from multinational to SME). The countries in the EU see both outward and inward investment with some variation as between years and conditioned too by their economic interests and actual or potential trading partners. Despite the general affluence of these countries and the positive financial flows, their good living conditions and high labour costs have led to a movement of labour intensive manufacturing processes towards lower cost countries with the probable result that the advanced EU economies are likely to retain only high value activities. Certain office functions and services are also tending to be off-shored. The trend is projected to be a continuing one with implications for the nature of the employment available and thus for the skills and competences of the European labour force.

These trends suggest that there is and will continue to be demand in highly skilled occupations for well qualified and mobile labour, willing to move between European partners as well as to work with countries and companies elsewhere in the world. While such workers will inevitably need support at intermediate levels from interculturally and linguistically skilled employees, less specialized and low paid employment is likely to decrease with off-shoring. Inevitably, basic

level work will still be available in certain service and care sectors for those with less advanced educational qualifications.

Current economic trends and forces mean that there is less permanence in employment and more flexible working patterns and the subsequent need for labour market re-training, upskilling and, often, conversion to new fields. There are variations in employment levels in EU countries and, within countries, between regions of the country concerned. In general, there is slight variation in employment around the European average depending on the country and the year. While newer members have experienced relatively high unemployment levels with the restructuring of their economies, in general, unemployment in them is beginning to fall, however slightly.

Europe is already seeing economic migration due to better salary levels and conditions or to developmental potential in other member states. This exodus concerns skilled and educated members of the workforce who may either find it difficult to get employment within their own country or who are attracted by higher salary levels or better opportunities elsewhere as well as those moving to take on less specialist employment (in hospitality, retail or domestic services, for instance). This benefits the Union as a whole, although the countries concerned sometimes regret the loss of the contribution which their nationals might make to their developing economies. Current patterns of migration within Europe mean that there is a need for linguistic competences and intercultural understanding at levels from basic to advanced.

While large companies and multinational corporations offer considerable employment opportunities throughout Europe, small and medium sized enterprises remain important providers of employment within both old and newer member countries. Depending on their sphere of activity these companies may also be active exporters with an important role to play in fostering employment and trading flows.

In order to remain competitive in the face of global competition, there is an ongoing concern to increase productivity and to create high performance workplaces with some countries showing better statistics than others in this respect. Given demographic shifts, there is also a need to increase labour force participation rates so as to draw full advantage from existing human resources.

### **Changing and emerging/new needs**

Languages are, and will remain, of increasing importance at different levels and for different functions to those who work within and outside of Europe.

While there is now heightened awareness of the professional relevance of linguistic and intercultural competences, it is far less clear which languages and which skills and competences constitute an added value in this respect. This was the starting point of sub-project 2. The sub-project working group set itself the task of establishing which skills and competences are likely to enhance graduates' opportunities on the European labour market and beyond and the project group was keen to obtain information based on tangible evidence as a

result of dialogue with the world of work – notably employers and graduates. The project particularly focused on non-language students and graduates, although it is obvious that as regards language training formerly existing sharp demarcation lines between modern language degree programmes and other types of programmes and offerings are rapidly disappearing.

Employability across Europe as well as in a global context implies at one level mobile professionals, relevant support staff and a range of other executives who move between a home base and other locations as part of their employment (whether this be for purposes of management, sales and marketing or a specialist activity such as legal work). With a view to career or other advantage, Europeans may also choose to relocate within the Union on a somewhat more permanent basis and find themselves integrated into local groupings or part of multinational teams. Mobility and resultant linguistic demands are by no means the sole preserve of higher or middle executive levels and their staff, as Europeans are increasingly ready to move to fill a range of basic service functions in other member states; however, the language needs are obviously different.

The actual languages required are naturally conditioned by professional requirements and the work in question. It is clear that while English is increasingly used as a means of communication in multinational corporations, English on its own is, as has often been pointed out, inadequate to meet the needs of business and other professional activities, the use of the client language being crucial to satisfactory outcomes.

While certain languages of Europe show particularly high demand (French, German, Spanish, Italian), it is important for those at work to have competence in further languages from either inside or outside Europe. Trade and other professional interaction may take place with a wide range of partner countries and languages depending on the activity in question. Even workers who are not mobile are likely, because of enhanced migratory flows and cross-country working, to require language skills. While it is unrealistic to suggest that students should study more than the current target of mother tongue plus two foreign languages, it is important that a wide range of European and world languages be offered and that the linguistic potential of communities originally from outside the Union but now settled within it should not be neglected. Also crucial is the need to incorporate within language learning knowledge of the language learning process as well as an understanding of key similarities between groups of languages. This is essential to facilitate not only the updating of existing language knowledge on the part of learners but also the lifelong acquisition of new languages in line with potential professional demands as they arise. Not enough is known about the form and pedagogy of such approaches and there is a need for further work in this area to underpin learning.

The results of sub-project activities confirm the special status of English as an international language, which is indispensable for the large majority of graduates. However, it is also clear that English is increasingly taken so much for granted that it often does not give graduates a competitive advantage. Thus, the interesting question in relation to graduates' language portfolio is which

foreign languages other than English they are competent in. In other words, the conclusion is: English is necessary, but more often than not it is not enough. In this respect, the findings of the consultation are revealing. While they confirm the well-known status of German, French, and Spanish, graduates reported that it was also important for them to learn other languages, such as Russian, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Dutch, Arabic, and Portuguese (in descending order).

In most countries competence in at least one foreign language is considered a required component of the cultural and intellectual background of a university graduate. The results of sub-project 2 clearly demonstrate a growing awareness among all stakeholders – university management, students, graduates and employers – of the vital importance for graduate employability of language and intercultural competences and the ability to perform professional tasks and functions in foreign languages.

However, what using a foreign language in a professional, work-related situation actually means is far from easy to define and describe. The questionnaire-based Europe-wide consultation conducted among employers and graduates provides evidence of the wide range of skills and competences required; just which skills and competences are required seems to depend on the language in question, the country of employment, the specific job situation and the task or tasks to be carried out in a given job situation. Two results of the consultation would seem to provide important food for thought for decision-makers in higher education: (i) Both employers and graduates indicate that as regards the first foreign language the most common situations of language use are rather general in nature: understanding and interacting in job-related communication situations (e.g. hosting a visitor, telephoning, travel, talking about one's job; reading and writing e-mails and short factual texts; following discussions and presentations in professional contexts; reading specialised articles and reports and summarising and reporting on them; communicating to manage international relations and customer contacts). (ii) More than 50% of graduate respondents had already worked abroad, in many cases in other parts of the world. Both findings would seem to suggest that students need to be equipped with rather general skills and competences that allow them to perform in and adapt to a variety of situations of communicative language use. However, the results of the consultation cannot be regarded as being representative. There is a need for further studies, for continuous consultation of employers and graduates as well as for research into the actual use of foreign languages in different job situations in different Member States and regions. In this context, another important aspect of the consultation should be highlighted. In designing the questionnaires, working group members were at pains to link foreign language skills and competences to perceived situations of communicative language use. From this it follows that it will be important to develop a common language for consultation between higher education experts and stakeholder representatives, couched in work-related 'can-do' statements. This would be an important step towards the identification and description of learning outcomes for higher education foreign language modules. Of course, it will be the task of language experts to interpret the results of consultations and research and to

make sure that provision is not geared to specific short-term needs of individual employers.

An understanding of interculturality and the importance of varying value systems is vital for successful transnational interaction or participation in multinational teams. This implies an awareness of differences as between different cultures in modes of negotiation, in hierarchical interaction, in social relations and an ability to manage potential points of friction arising from such differences, create a common understanding and maintain good relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural issues such as these should also be built in to the teaching and learning of languages.

The precise range and level of language competences will be conditioned by the nature of work undertaken in particular professional arenas. The workplace situation also determines the relative importance of written and spoken communicative skills. However, the capacity to interact effectively in discussion and negotiation in specialist areas as well as ability to deal with relevant documentation (whether for updating or professional purposes) are important. In some circumstances, the skills most in demand tend to be spoken communication skills; at the managerial level, however, written skills are needed as well and university graduates entering the workplace are certainly likely to need skills of writing and reading as well as oral fluency. Technical staff, too, require effective reading as well as listening and speaking skills. General language competence for social interaction and day to day living is also important.

All this indicates that learners need to acquire a good general knowledge of the language in question (its system and modes of expression) as well as linguistic proficiency in their professional domain, enabling them to function in their specialist area in target language workplaces as well as in the country concerned. This may be provided in some cases by study programmes uniting languages and a professional area.

Today, it is considered essential for graduates to have generic or transferable skills to enable them to operate effectively in the European and global environments in which they will move, in other words, they need general skills for undertaking professional tasks and interacting in the workplace that are not subject dependent. Communicative spoken and written skills are of major importance and include interaction with and among teams, project management; presentation; negotiation, analysis, synthesis and focused writing as well as the ability to undertake activities via distance technology.

Language needs may thus be said to focus on the languages offered and the curriculum but there are also implications for the education of language teachers. Their training should (where necessary) be refocused to enable them to educate students of languages to meet the linguistic, interpersonal, professional and lifelong learning challenges of a world that requires high levels of communicative and intercultural competence in acquired languages as well as in the mother tongue.

## **Curriculum innovation and consultation/collaboration**

It is now agreed that higher education has to contribute to society; hence there is a growing awareness of the importance of and the need for structured consultation and collaboration between employers and educational institutions to bridge the gap between study and work. This trend has been given particular impetus by the Bologna process. The creation of the European higher education area designed to accompany and complement political, social and economic European integration aims at, among other things, the creation of a dynamic, internationally competitive European knowledge-based society, thus putting greater emphasis on the professional relevance of knowledge, skills and competences acquired by higher education students.

The consultation process forming part of TNP3 and the discussions held at various conference workshops throughout the project have highlighted the fact, and thereby confirmed the assumption underlying the entire TNP, that structured consultation between universities and employers is in the interest of both sides. Through this process, the universities can reach a clearer understanding of the (perceived) needs of the world of work, while employers are guided to reflect in a more informed manner on the needs of their companies. The descriptions of work-related situations of communicative language use prepared within sub-project 2 are a clear case in point. Members of the sub-project 2 working group were encouraged – many of them for the first time - to reflect on the use of foreign languages in work-related situations, and they were able to describe the work-related use of foreign-languages in a manner that was comprehensible to employers and graduates across Europe. The quite specific ‘can-do’ questions on which the questionnaires were based made it possible for respondents to give clear answers, and for the analysis of the data to establish interesting and relevant information about the ranking of and the importance attached to individual skills and competences in a variety of work situations and for different languages. The consultation also demonstrated that it is important for universities to track their graduates’ careers, as in a globalised world of work young graduates often find employment in other Member States or, indeed, in other parts of the world, rather than in the region in which a given university is located.

What needs to come next is the development of sets of work-related, professionally relevant descriptors of language and language-related skills and competences based on the Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*, and aligned to the *European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)* and the *Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA*.

## **Recommendations and questions to be addressed in the dissemination process and beyond**

The following are a brief presentation of the key recommendations resulting from TNP3-SP2. At the same time, these recommendations should also be seen questions which various stakeholder ought to ask themselves: Where are

we on these? Are we willing/able to make the necessary changes to implement the recommendations? What happens if we do implement the recommended changes?, etc. The recommendations should primarily be seen as a framework for further discussions and developments inside universities and, perhaps even more important, for consultation between universities and external stakeholders regarding curriculum reform, pedagogical reform, and the integration of languages into university programmes in general.

- At present, language modules and offerings are typically based on content (input) rather than on output, i.e. on the skills and competences students are expected to have acquired by the end of a given programme or module and on the kind professional tasks they are able to perform by applying the language and communication competences acquired. In line with the philosophy underlying the Bologna process, the paradigm of curriculum development should be changed; like all study programmes introduced within the Bologna structure, language modules and offerings should be designed from the learning outcomes end.
- A European project should be launched to be carried out by higher education language specialists in collaboration with employers and graduates for the development of sets of descriptors for language and intercultural skills and competences related to situations of professional language use, as well as for the development of a number of exemplary language modules.
- Universities should include foreign languages in their career tracking. They should question subsets of graduates at regular intervals about the use of foreign languages in professional contexts, and invite them to comment on the appropriateness or otherwise of the language training received at university. Information obtained in this way should be used for a regular revision of language offerings. Case studies of successful career tracking of this kind should be made available at European level.
- Needs analyses and studies should be undertaken on a regular basis in order to obtain robust information about language requirements in the various sectors of the labour market, including the public sector and INGO's, and about language-related trends in the employment of university graduates. The information obtained in this way would provide additional reference points for curriculum development and innovation.
- At universities across Europe, students learn languages in higher education and in so doing, they make language choices. In institutions of higher education, decision-makers at various levels of management also make choices as to the range of languages which it is feasible to offer and the levels of interest at which it may be considered appropriate to offer particular languages and levels. However, little is known beyond the anecdotal about the factors which condition these choices. Are particular languages selected by students on the basis of tradition; perceived needs in the economy; family, school or peer influence; personal experience and interests such as holidays; perceived difficulty or accessibility of individual languages or current beliefs and trends in education? It is recommended that universities should base their decisions on language choice on

consultations with employers, graduates and – students (!), and that they should inform students about the reasons underlying the choice of languages offered.

- In describing the learning outcomes of their foreign language offerings, universities should use a language based on the CEFR and the EQF – and possibly national qualifications frameworks –, incorporating the detailed descriptions of situations of professional language use developed for the questionnaires used in the Europe-wide consultation, and paying particular attention to the prioritised situations.



