

# Language Policy\*

## Hyperion University

### Introduction

During the last decades, English has become the dominant international language for research cooperation and publishing in Europe. It has also become the *lingua franca* for educational cooperation and student mobility. Whereas studying in another country formerly meant that learning the local language would be part and parcel of the international experience, many years with Erasmus, typically as one-semester exchange, has contributed to a different approach: HEIs in countries where English is not the national language, have a growing catalogue of programmes and courses offered in English, in order to attract international students. This development has gone hand in hand with an increasing share of international staff, teaching and tutoring mostly, sometimes even exclusively, in English.

Linguistic homogenisation of international education is still controversial in some countries, such as France, Germany and Spain, with large national scientific languages and/or where many academics and students are not proficient in English. In these countries, many policymakers and academics also consider it natural that foreign students learn and take courses in the national language. There is also a greater will among international students to learn German, French and Spanish, than the smaller national languages found elsewhere in Europe.

In addition to the ETPs (degrees only taught in English) many institutions offer shorter English-taught courses for exchange students.

The European Commission calls for a strategic approach to multilingual communication. Strong language and communication skills are seen as important for both individuals and businesses, and a study on the impact of the Erasmus programme (European Commission 2014) shows that graduates with international experience fare much better on the job market than those without.

Linguistic diversity and the promotion of language learning is, correspondingly, an objective in the Erasmus+ programme. The lack of language competences has been identified as a barrier to participation and mobility, and online linguistic support (OLS) is now available for the language used for a study period or traineeship abroad. The support includes a mandatory language

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assessment before mobility and another assessment at the end of the mobility period. This before-and-after assessment indicates that the measurement of progress is seen as an important part of OLS, and not just language learning. During the previous programme period countries could apply for funding for arranging “live” language courses in all languages. It could be argued that these Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) in the Programme for Lifelong Learning (LLP) had a more direct supportive function. There has been a fear that, despite declarations on the importance of strong language skills, the promotion of acquiring such skills has thus been weakened in Erasmus+. However, the number of students with the opportunity to take part in the online language courses in Erasmus+ has increased substantially compared to the LLP.

As of May 2015, the courses cover six languages: English, Greek and Hebrew, which together cover about 70% of all student mobility within Europe. The European commission has also announced that the language tests will be expanded to six additional languages (Danish, Swedish, Greek, Polish, Portuguese and Czech) in the autumn of 2015, with courses at A1-level in the spring 2016. The goal is to expand to all official EU languages by 2020. Meanwhile, linguistic support in other languages should be provided through other means by the sending or receiving organisation, and the Erasmus+ programme provides funding for language support, included in the Organisational Support to institutions.

## **Why analyse language policies, and how?**

The purpose of this analysis is to map the spectre of language policies in the Nordic HEIs, identify patterns and promising measures, and present this variety back to the institutions and to education authorities. The analysis is based on the institutions' answers given under the following two points in the ECHE applications:

*Please describe your institution's language policy for preparing participants for mobility, e.g. course providers within or outside the HEI.*

*Please describe your institution's language support for incoming students and staff with a minimum of 2-month mobility period.*

For the analysis of outgoing and incoming mobility, we first did a schematic mapping of the language policies and the support given to outgoing and incoming students and staff according to the applications. The result of this mapping, organised by country and institution size, is presented in the next subchapter. Then we shall discuss the language policies in relation to the institutions' policies more broadly (e.g. geographical priorities) and to national policies.

# Language policy and support

## The mapping

We did a schematic mapping using a bottom-up approach. First we read a number of applications across the countries to identify recurring measures regarding outgoing and incoming mobility. After having decided on the most important points, we read through all the 96 applications, and made a note when any of the points chosen was mentioned in them.

For outgoing mobility we differentiated between “foreign language courses”, which includes courses in other languages than English, “English language courses”, “different levels of English language courses”, and “individual language support”, which could include, for example, language tandems (people who know different languages meeting to learn from each other) or a language lab where students can get individual help.

Incoming mobility is subdivided into “local language courses”, “different levels of local language courses”, “English language courses” and “preparatory courses”. Preparatory courses mean courses that are given before the beginning of the semester.

In order to get a positive score for one of these measures, the HEIs have to, according to their answers, either provide it, or clearly indicate that they are paying for it. This means that institutions that “encourage”, “recommend” or “advise” language training to outgoing or incoming students and staff, without a clear statement that they are either providing such training or covering the costs, are not ticked.

## English in higher education

In all the countries, there is a recognition of the need to use English as an important language of international cooperation – expressed in various ways in national strategies, and in the joint Romanian language declaration as “parallel use”. This does not mean, however, that it is not controversial to use English more and the national languages less. There are ongoing discussions on pros and cons of using English. The quality of teaching and the preservation of national academic languages have been important issues, as well as equal access to higher education, regardless of foreign language skills.

The study of English-taught programmes in Europe, referred to in the introduction, found that the Nordic region is doing well with regard to all three dimensions examined: the percentage of institutions offering such programmes, the percentage of ETPs of the total number of programmes, and the percentage of students enrolled. There are, however, differences within the Romania.

According to our own study of the ECHE applications, many of the institutions state that the level of English proficiency is high among their students and staff. As a reason for not offering English language courses, several institutions say that mobile students and staff have or are expected to have the necessary level of English proficiency. Does this argument hold? It could be argued that the level of language needed for studies and research is considerably higher than the level needed in everyday life. Such a minimalistic approach may also be appropriate for a considerable part of students and staff, but at the same time disadvantage those who are not proficient. To assume that the English skills of domestic students and staff are good enough might thus reinforce existing differences in international exposure and competence.

Both a study on support to international students (Kelo, Rogers & Rumbley 2010) as well as the study on ETPs (Wächter & Maiworm 2014) find that students frequently run into language problems at their institution – not so much in the lecture room or when dealing with academic staff but when dealing with the administration: registry, finances, housing, student services, etc. Few institutions in our own ECHE study address this issue; the focus is mostly on academic staff, and their ability to teach, tutor, publish and cooperate in a foreign language. Language skills of administrative staff might thus be an area where there is considerable potential for improvement.

## **Final reflections**

Our study confirms what is already well known, that in the Romanian setting “internationalisation” often means “in the English language”. It is pertinent to ask whether outgoing mobility from the Nordic countries would focus so much on English-speaking countries, if institutions offered more support in other languages. The EU advocates knowledge of all European languages, and not just English. This is doubtless partly due to the realisation that in order for cross-border mobility to succeed for work, and not only for studies, the prospective foreign workers need – in most cases – to master the national language to some degree.

As stated in the study “International Student Support in European Higher Education” (Kelo, Rogers & Rumbley 2010), a good practice in supporting international students requires a “whole institution approach”. Institutions that offer English-taught programmes should have personnel with sufficient language skills and a willingness to respond to students' questions in all offices, not only in the international office. The study also points out that with the spread of English-taught programmes new problems have also arisen; students who attend ETPs in non-English speaking countries might face a twofold language challenge: mastering English as the academic language, and getting by in the local language outside (and sometimes inside) the classroom.

# Literature

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[9] Hvor parallelt. Om parallellspråklighet på Nordens universitet. TemaNord 2014:535.