

# Language policy in higher education in Europe: a pilot survey

Angela Chambers  
University of Limerick, IE

## 1. Introduction

As part of the work of the European Language Council's (ELC) Interest Group on Language Policy in Universities in Europe, which was set up by Wolfgang Mackiewicz in 2001,<sup>1</sup> a pilot survey was undertaken in 2002/2003, and a questionnaire was sent to the higher education institutions which are members of the ELC, 150 in all. The aim of the survey was to obtain information on the current situation concerning language policy among the members in order to assist the Interest Group in its activities. This brief report provides a summary of the results of the survey, which had four main objectives:

- 1) To discover which institutions within the ELC have or are developing language policies
- 2) To obtain qualitative information from those institutions which have or are developing language policies
- 3) To discover what ELC members consider to be the advantages of a language policy and the obstacles which they would encounter in developing one
- 4) To obtain information on the initiatives being undertaken in the area of languages in the institutions surveyed, from which language policies may be inferred, when they are not explicitly stated.

While the number of responses is small, with only 21 institutions providing information, the respondents include a high proportion of universities active in the area of language policy, and as we shall see, they fulfil to a considerable extent the aims of the survey. This report includes information on the questionnaire, the responses received in relation to the first three objectives listed above, and the models of language policy in universities in Europe which emerge from this pilot survey.<sup>2</sup> It has been decided to concentrate at this stage on those universities which have or are developing a language policy, and to deal with the fourth objective at a later stage in the activities of the Interest Group.

## 2. The questionnaire

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<sup>1</sup> The membership of the Interest Group includes: Handelshøjskolen i Århus, DK; Freie Universität Berlin, DE; Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BE; Université de Lausanne, CH ; University of Limerick, IE; Université Marc Bloch (Strasbourg), FR ; Universität Wien, AT ; Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council, BE.

<sup>2</sup> The author acknowledges the invaluable assistance of Kirstie Raby, *stagiaire* from the Université Pierre Mendès-France, Grenoble II, FR, in the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, particularly in relation to the classification of the qualitative responses to Questions 15 and 16.

The questionnaire<sup>3</sup> was sent to ELC members in November 2002 and again in March 2003. It included 16 questions in all, with the first 8 intended to discover the main characteristics of the institution, as well as to identify those respondents who would be willing to provide additional information. Responses to the three questions relating to existing language policies, and to the development of a language policy, are analysed here, namely:

- Q9 Does your institution have a language policy or a language plan?  
(Possible responses: Yes, No, Currently being developed, Don't know.)
- Q15 If your institution were to develop a language policy or a language plan, what in your view are the five most important elements which should be included?
- Q16 What obstacles do you think you would encounter in developing a language policy or a language plan for your institution?

Where the response to Question 9 was positive, respondents were asked to send a copy of the relevant document, and further information was requested. Those developing policies were also asked to provide additional information. Responses to these requests will be summarised below. In the case of Questions 15 and 16, respondents were asked to cite five factors in order of importance, starting with the most important.

### **3. Responses to questionnaire**

#### ***3.1 Respondents***

The distribution of the respondents by country was as follows:

Switzerland	4
United Kingdom	4
Belgium	3
Germany	2

One each from Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Romania, and Spain.

In some respects this distribution corresponds to the representation of countries in the ELC, with the United Kingdom, for example, very well represented in the association in relation to other countries with similar populations. The number of responses from Switzerland and Belgium is, however, significant here, particularly when the population and the number of universities is taken into account, suggesting that universities in these countries are much more likely to respond than their counterparts in other European countries. This is perhaps because the reality of language use in those countries gives them a greater awareness of the importance of multilingualism and more experience in promoting it.

#### ***3.2 Q9 Does your institution have a language policy or a language plan?***

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<sup>3</sup> A copy in reduced format is added in Appendix 1.

Responses were as follows:

Yes	3
No	10
Developing	8

Given the small dimensions of this pilot survey, it is clear that the high proportion of respondents which have or are developing language policies cannot be seen as representative of Europe as a whole, but rather that the respondents constitute a self-selecting group of highly motivated universities, all members of the European Language Council. However, as the aim of the survey was not to obtain a representative European sample, the respondents made it possible to fulfil the objectives as outlined above.

The three universities which had answered in the affirmative were then asked to send copies of the policy document. In one case this was in fact unnecessary, as Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania, had already included the policy document in French and English with the response to the questionnaire.<sup>4</sup> The other two respondents, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and the University of Freiburg, Switzerland, replied that no single document could be sent, but that documentation relating to language policy was integrated in various documents in the University. Freiburg also provided additional information in the form of a journal article on the subject of the bilingual university.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that, although there is a high level of activity in the area of language policy among respondents, only one university from this self-selecting group of interested universities has actually developed an officially accepted written document clearly describing that policy. This is not to criticise the other universities. It shows rather, as we shall see, that there are several different ways in which a language policy can be drafted and implemented.

### **3.3 *The content of a university language policy***

Two aspects of the context of the language policy document of Babes-Bolyai University are worth noting here, as they are likely to figure prominently in any university language policy in Europe. Firstly the policy is explicitly situated in a European context, with explicit references in the introductory paragraph to the Bologna process and the 1+ 2 recommendation, which proposes that two languages should be learned in addition to the mother tongue.<sup>6</sup> This does not, of course, exclude the study of non-European languages. Secondly the introduction to the Babes-Bolyai policy document also emphasises the ‘ “key abilities” needed in shaping the European citizen of the future’, once again based on European documents. The abilities

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<sup>4</sup> The policy document of Babes-Bolyai University, written by Rodica Baconsky, will be published in ELC Information Bulletin No. 10 in 2004 and will be available on the ELC Web site.  
<http://www.fu-berlin.de/elc/>

<sup>5</sup> M. Langner and R. Imbach. “The University of Freiburg: A model for a bilingual university.” *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. XXV, No.4, 2000, pp.461-468.

<sup>6</sup> *White Paper on Education and Training. Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society*. Brussels: European Commission, 1995. COM(95)590.  
<http://europa.eu.int/en/record/white/edu9511/>

mentioned include communication skills, intercultural communication skills, self-training, and ‘methods of accessing the knowledge pertaining to their respective field of specialization’.

The principal components of the Babes-Bolyai policy document in relation to students of disciplines other than languages are worth noting here. It includes provision for the study of two languages (Languages B and C), in addition to the mother tongue (Language A), and also optional study of the mother tongue itself by all students of disciplines other than languages. For Language B, an initial diagnostic test is followed by a mandatory course (two hours per week for the first four semesters), focusing on specialised language use, the skills needed in a future profession, and intercultural communication skills. This culminates in an examination evaluated in line with the *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, Teaching, Assessment*.<sup>7</sup> In Semesters 5 – 7 study of Language C for two hours per week is mandatory, with a focus on listening and reading skills (general and specialised language), followed by a final examination in the context of the Common European Framework.

Finally the policy document deals with the infrastructure necessary for the implementation of this policy, including:

- The participation of staff from other disciplines throughout the planning of the courses
- The development of glossaries and collections of specialised texts where necessary
- The inclusion of foreign titles in bibliographies across the University
- The development of resources for self-study by the two University language centres
- The provision by the Language Centres of Language Proficiency certificates ‘which are prerequisite for the degree, master and doctoral exams, for promotions, employment, bids for scholarships abroad’
- The provision of language classes (general and specialised) by the Language Centres for staff as well as students
- The introduction of optional mother tongue units to ‘refine written and oral communication skills at academic level’.

### **3.4 Models for the development of a language policy**

The additional information requested from the eight universities which were developing language policies, together with the information provided by the three universities which had policies, provided valuable information on the ways in which these policies had been or were being developed. The following questions were sent by email to the eight respondents:

- 1) What factors have led your university to decide to develop a language policy?

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<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe. *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2001.  
[http://www.culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents\\_intro/common\\_framework.html](http://www.culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents_intro/common_framework.html)

- 2) What procedure is being used to develop it?  
 Has a committee or group been set up?  
 What sections of the university are represented?  
 What is the function of the person chairing the group?  
 Who does the group report to?  
 Is there an expected completion date?
- 3) At what level in the University will the policy be accepted?
- 4) Have any aspects of the content of the policy been decided? Please give details.

Please add any other comments you would like to make on developing the language policy.

The responses revealed that the development of a language policy was at an early stage in all these institutions, and no definite information on content was provided to add to that provided in Section 3.3 above. It is interesting to observe, however, that three distinct models can be observed among the 11 respondents active in this area, either having developed or in the course of developing a language policy. Such a policy may be developed:

- 1) At the level of the language department
- 2) At senior management level
- 3) As part of an integrated model.

#### *3.4.1 At the level of the language department*

This activity involves the individuals responsible for teaching languages initiating the process of developing a language policy and doing so within their own circle. At this level the implementation of the policy is not guaranteed, as those involved do not control what students from other faculties may study languages, what role languages have in their programmes of study, what funding is available for the implementation of the strategy, and what structures are set up to ensure that research underpinning that activity is undertaken. However, it does ensure that any policy subsequently developed has been discussed by those involved in implementing it. It could potentially solve the problem of one respondent at the next level (See 3.4.2) who commented that the implementation of the policy at senior management level was seriously hindered by the resistance encountered from those responsible for delivering the language courses.

#### *3.4.2 At senior management level*

It is clear that, when a language policy is introduced at this level, it has a greater chance of being successfully implemented, as both commitment by the institution and funding are more likely to follow decisions taken at senior level. All three existing policies and the majority of the eight being developed are using this model. Four general factors emerge from the information provided by respondents:

- 1) The policy is developed by a team consisting of senior management and language specialists at senior level. For example, this is the case in the Université de Lausanne and the École Polytechnique de Lausanne,

Switzerland, where a common language policy is being developed by both institutions.

- 2) Departments and faculties other than the language departments are involved in the process. Indeed, in Kodolanyi University, Hungary, for example, it was these other sections of the University which initiated the process. It is intended that the resulting courses will focus on Languages for Specific Purposes.
- 3) The majority of the language staff in the institutions is committed to university-wide provision of courses in Languages for Specific Purposes. This is the case, for example, in the Université Catholique de l'Ouest, Angers, France.
- 4) A systematic approach to the planning and implementation of the policy is explicitly adopted. The document from Babes-Bolyai University, for example, can be seen not only as a language policy, but also as a language plan.

#### *3.4.3 As part of an integrated model*

In Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and the University of Freiburg, Switzerland, language policy is not described in a single document, but integrated in various documents in the universities. Langner and Imbach's study<sup>8</sup> provides detailed information on the implementation of the policy in various parts of the University of Freiburg. It is interesting to note that several aspects of the implementation of their policy could also apply in varying degrees to universities outside bilingual communities. Examples include the following:

- 1) Students may opt to take a bilingual degree, with 25% of credits/examinations taken through the second language. There is a considerable amount of flexibility here, including, for example, the possibility of following a course in the second language and taking the examination through the mother tongue.
- 2) The University systematically encourages intercultural dialogue.
- 3) A deliberate effort is made to identify and eliminate obstacles to bilingual choices.
- 4) The image of bilingualism is actively promoted.
- 5) An official monitoring process has been set up, in the form of a Commission on Bilingualism.
- 6) Research in language learning and teaching to underpin these developments is actively encouraged.

#### **3.5 Q15 *If your institution were to develop a language policy or a language plan, what in your view are the five most important elements which should be included?***

Responses to this question were classified into 24 different areas, with three themes recurring. Firstly, the need for a policy to be firmly embedded within the structures of the organisation was stressed by 15 respondents. As one respondent commented:

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<sup>8</sup> M. Langner and R. Imbach. "The University of Freiburg: A model for a bilingual university." *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. XXV, No.4, 2000, pp.461-468.

[There is a need for] a long-term plan to embed languages in the main curriculum with growing opportunities to study modules through another language.

The second most frequently recurring theme was the need for language study to be integrated into programmes of study, and for courses to focus on Languages for Specific Purposes (13 responses).

A cross-curricular language policy is needed, e.g. languages should not be viewed as a separate subject.

Thirdly, multilingualism was cited by 11 respondents as an important aim of any university language policy. Other elements mentioned by respondents included the need for language courses to be provided for teachers and administrative staff (6), the importance of encouraging learner autonomy and self-study, assisted by Information and Communications Technologies (5), the importance of recognition and possible compulsory status (5), the necessity of adequate financial and physical resources (4), and the importance of integrating culture in the language courses (4).

### **3.6 Q16 *What obstacles do you think you would encounter in developing a language policy or a language plan for your institution?***

A clear pattern also emerges from responses to this question, with two obstacles mentioned by a large proportion of respondents. Predictably, financial constraints are considered to be a major obstacle by 16 respondents. Indeed, this is the only obstacle cited in two responses, who write as follows:

zero investment

lack of recognition of real costs of language provision (inappropriate funding models)

The second most frequently recurring obstacle is closely related to the first, although finance is not specifically mentioned. For 14 respondents lack of support and commitment represent an important obstacle. Other obstacles cited include lack of student motivation (6), cultural / psychological issues (5), and resources (4).

## **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of the results of this pilot survey reveal several examples of good practice in the area of university language policy, and information on different models for developing a language policy which may be of use to those wishing to begin such a development. In particular, the study suggests that the experiences of bilingual universities can serve as a relevant example to universities outside bilingual communities. The preponderance of responses from countries where multilingualism is the norm does, however, suggest that the development of university language policies across Europe is unlikely to become a reality in the near future, at least not without some strong incentive for universities to undertake such a development. Including a request for a copy of a language policy document in European funding

applications, for example, might well produce a rapid increase in the number of such policy documents, and give support to language departments eager to develop and implement such a policy. While this is unlikely to lead to genuine commitment in the short term, it would be a first step in the acceptance of the existence of such a policy. This would then create a need for access to information on the development and implementation of university language policies which could serve as a guide to those embarking on such an initiative.



## Appendix 1

### Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council

#### Questionnaire on language policy in higher education

*All information contained in this questionnaire will be treated as confidential. The identity of the institution will not be revealed without prior permission in any publications or presentations resulting from the project.*

##### **Preliminary Information**

1. Name of institution:

Address:

2. Disciplines studied:

(e.g. Humanities, Law, Business, Sciences, Medicine etc.)

3. Official language(s) of the institution (e.g. English for an institution in England; French for one in France, possibly French and German for one in Switzerland, etc.):

*In Questions 4 - 6 below, approximate numbers will suffice.*

4. Number of students in the institution:

5. Number of academic staff:

6. Number of academic staff in languages:

7. Name of person(s) completing the form:

8. Position in the institution:

If you would be prepared to give further information, please give contact details below:

Tel.

Fax

E-mail

##### **University Language Policy/Language Plan**

9. Does your institution have a language policy or a language plan?

(Please tick the appropriate answer)

Yes                       No                       Currently being developed

Don't know

If yes, please enclose a copy.

10. If your institution does not have a language policy or a language plan, would it be interested in developing one?

(Please tick the appropriate answer)

Yes                       No                       Don't know

11. Please complete the following table to provide information on initiatives involving languages in your institution since 1 January 1996. Please place one tick in the appropriate box for each innovation (for example, if you have two developments involving offering new languages in the area of Translation and Interpreting, place two ticks in that box.)

<i>Type of course</i>	<i>New languages offered</i>	<i>Innovative teaching &amp; learning methods</i>	<i>Curriculum innovation</i>	<i>New organisational structures</i>	<i>Expanded resources to underpin developments in languages</i>	<i>Other (Please specify on a separate sheet)</i>
<i>Traditional language &amp; literature degrees</i>						
<i>Alternative programmes*</i>						
<i>Languages for students of all disciplines</i>						
<i>Translation &amp; Interpreting</i>						
<i>Language teacher education</i>						
<i>Post-graduate programmes</i>						
<i>Continuing education**</i>						
<i>Other</i>						

\* Applied Languages. European Studies etc.

\*\* Language courses for adults not enrolled on a full programme of study.

12. Would you be willing to provide at a later date a brief account of the nature of the innovations and to comment very briefly on how successful they have been? Please tick the appropriate answer.

Yes                       No

13. Are languages in your institution generally taught through the target language? Please tick the appropriate answer

Yes                       No                       Don't know

14. Are any non-language courses in your institution taught through languages other than the official language(s) of your institution (named in Q 3)? Please write details in the table below.

Programme of study of which it is part	Language through which it is taught	Students taking the course (home students/ ERASMUS)

Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary.

15. If your institution were to develop a language policy or a language plan, what in your view are the five most important elements which should be included? (In order of importance, starting with the most important.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What obstacles do you think you would encounter in developing a language policy or a language plan for your institution? (In order of importance, starting with the greatest obstacle.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Other comments

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it to:

[Contact details provided]

Please enclose a copy of your institution's language policy/plan, if applicable.

Date:

Signature: