

Developing different models for language policies in Higher Education

Country: Switzerland

Institution's name: University of Lausanne (UNIL) Language Centre

Site: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL)

Name and function: Elisabeth Paliot, Head of UNIL Language Centre, EPFL site

Date: May 2015

1. Present the LP policy of your institution (Who designed it? How? How is it evaluated? Is it implicit or explicit? etc.)

The Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) is governed in accordance with the Federal Act on the Federal Institutes of Technology¹ (FIT Act) and based on certain specific prerequisites and conditions resulting from the ETH Board's strategic planning programme 2012-2016². These basic principles, strategic objectives and key focus areas have been broken down into specific goals and actions on the EPFL level (Polylex³) and translated into a specific EPFL Development Plan 2012-2016⁴.

1.1 Explicit statements on languages

a. Policies

On a national level, Art. 12 of the FIT Act⁵ lays down recommendations for language use and specifies the languages of instruction and research to be used (ie the four national languages plus English). In the same directive, the EPFs are also encouraged to promote understanding of associated cultural values.

Regarding EPFL, the Directives on Teaching Languages (LEX 2.11.4⁶) "set the rules governing the teaching languages used in Bachelor and Master curricula, in order to:

- prepare students to master scientific communication at international level;
- foster integration of students who are not native French-speakers."⁷

¹ Loi sur les EPF, <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19910256/index.html>

² Strategic planning 2012-2016 of the ETH Board for the ETH Domain, ETH Board, Haldlerliweg 15, CH-8092 Zurich, www.ethrat.ch, online available <http://www.ethrat.ch/fr/search/node/plan%20strat%C3%A9gique%202012-2016>

³ Polylex, Legal texts, <http://polylex.epfl.ch/page-65331-en.html>

⁴ EPFL Development Plan 2012-2016, Version 05.05.2011, online available <http://ae.epfl.ch/PlanDeveloppement2012-2016>

⁵ <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19910256/index.html>

⁶ LEX 2.11.4, online available <http://search.epfl.ch/web.action?q=LEX%202.11.4>

⁷ LEX 2.11.4, article 1

b. EPFL Language guidelines

EPFL fosters bilingualism and stipulates French and English as the official teaching languages; all official documents and web pages are also bilingual.

Bachelor programmes are taught mainly in French because the main target audience are French-speakers and/or students of another national language; however, in order to facilitate the integration of Swiss-German and English-speaking students, to support the integration of students, and to prepare for the transition to Master programmes (taught mainly in English), some basic science courses are also given in German and English. The target audience for Master studies consists of national and international students.

c. Tools to foster language skills

Recommendations for students

EPFL considers that for holders of a European high-school certificate, a B2 level in French is necessary in order to follow Bachelor programmes. It recommends students entering Master programmes to have reached at least C1 in the language of instruction.

International candidates from non-French-speaking countries are required to supplement their application with a certificate proving their language-level⁸. (The non-achievement of these recommended language levels does not however exclude admission.)

First-year Bachelor students are required by the institution to take an on-site English assessment test organised by the UNIL Language Centre, which allows them to discover their level. If B2 is not achieved, they are strongly advised to follow an appropriate language module at UNIL's Language Centre, EPFL.

University of Lausanne (UNIL) Language Centre at EPFL

EPFL offers language courses to all members of its community through its on-campus Language Centre (managed by UNIL) encouraging and promoting the development of a plurilingual and intercultural communicative competence.

In the preamble to the agreement linking UNIL and EPFL, the development of a language-training concept adapted to academic needs and purposes is highlighted.

The main objective⁹ of the EPFL Language Centre is to offer language training which reflects a coherent language policy according to the Bologna requisites and which is based on the constantly-changing needs of the entire EPFL community. In this highly multilingual and multicultural context, the language modules of the Language Centre encourage each student to enlarge his or her plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire in the context of life-long learning based on personal needs (employability, academic needs and social integration).

Integration measures

Several options exist to help non-French-speaking students/staff and their partners become integrated in EPFL and the local environment. They include intensive French courses organised by the Language Centre, Welcome Days for new international and exchange students, coaching etc.

⁸ <http://bachelor.epfl.ch/cms/site/bachelor2/lang/en/admission-1st-year>

⁹ See Cahier de charge Centre de langues EPFL 2011, p.3

1.2 Implicit features on languages

In both, the ETH and EPFL strategic planning documents, languages or a language policy are not mentioned explicitly. However, some of the statements and requests may require language and intercultural communication competencies and expertise:

Knowledge and technology transfer

- The willingness to cooperate with potential users in business and industry, public administration and regulatory authorities
- Ongoing dialogue with business and the wider society
- Building of bridges between the different scientific domains

Switzerland's role at home and abroad

- Performing a national duty to ensure Switzerland's future
- Making a Swiss contribution in the international context of addressing the global challenges of the 21st century

Far-reaching educational objectives

- Innovative approaches to teaching and research-based learning combined with multilingualism ensure excellence in teaching.
- Bachelor degree programmes will be geared to national needs and participants. The courses offered at Masters level, and in particular at Doctoral level, now have a strong international orientation.

Cooperation and integration

- Co-operation with and at other universities on the Swiss level
- Exchange and co-operation with international universities
- Optimal integration of foreign staff, lecturers, students and doctoral students and development of their understanding of Switzerland's customs and way of life
- Creating and utilising opportunities for student internships as well as development and career opportunities for ETH graduates abroad

Notwithstanding these measures, the enlargement of a multilingual and multicultural repertoire continues to be a matter of personal commitment and motivation. The language modules offered by the Language Centre are optional and not integrated in the faculty's course structure; recommendations are given by EPFL for a minimum entrance language level, but no control or restrictions are applied. There is also no obligation for EPFL teaching staff to improve their language of teaching if it's not their first language. The bridge from multilingual theory to practice remains to be taken.

2. Which conceptions of languages and of multilingualism does it have (implicitly or explicitly)? (eg core competence, transversal competence, codes of communication, cultural, identity and heritage values, lingua franca, etc.)

In my opinion, languages at EPFL are considered as a transversal competence. However, the status of languages should be stated in a more official and structured way.

English is one of the main languages at EPFL, but other languages should be developed as well.

3. Which levels does it cover (teaching staff, researchers, non-teaching staff, students)? How?

As already mentioned under question 1, the (implicit and explicit) language policy covers the entire EPFL population, but through different actions and procedures:

- Institutional level: The EPFL is officially multilingual and multicultural. All official communication and documents are written in French and translated in English; the web pages are also bilingual.
- Faculty level: Each faculty defines the language of instruction and specifies it in the course description.
- Personal level: Every member of the EPFL staff is encouraged to develop his or her plurilingual and pluricultural profile by following language modules at the Language Centre. The language modules are free of charge for every student or doctoral student and financed by EPFL Educational Affairs (DAF); all other members of the EPFL community pay tuition fees per semester which are divided between the Staff Training Service (STS), the unit or department and the employee. If the employee enrolls in a language course at the request of his/her superior, the unit or department must pay the whole amount not covered by the STS.

4. What impact does it want to achieve (governance, learning/teaching, research, relationship with society etc.)? How?

The achievements are on the following levels (as already mentioned under point 1.2):

- Knowledge and technology transfer
- EPFL's role in Switzerland and abroad
- Educational objectives
- Cooperation and integration in the local society and abroad

5. How does it reflect the overall mission and vision of the institution?

In the EPFL Development Plan 2012-2016, it is clearly stated that

“At the heart of the diversified and international Lake Geneva area, the EPFL has deep roots in European culture. Like Switzerland, with its multilingual and open-minded tradition, EPFL is proud of its multiculturalism and academic diversity, which contribute to its wealth, visibility and attractiveness.”¹⁰

Some structures such as the Language Centre with its training possibilities contribute to the achievement of the EPFL's characteristics mentioned in the Development Plan. Nonetheless, the fact that knowledge is constructed, conceptualized and communicated through languages and that only an appropriate level of expertise in the languages of instruction, research and institutional communication allow access and quality, needs to be formally integrated in the collective consciousness and the ensuing political decisions and procedures.

¹⁰ EPFL Development Plan 2012-2016, Version 05.05.2011, online available <http://ae.epfl.ch/PlanDeveloppement2012-2016>, p.19