Standard Policy Brief Template

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022)

Section for Higher Education | Division for Education 2030

Type: One organisation ☐ | Alliance ☒

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION. POLICY PROPOSALS

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KEY THEME: INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Date [14/03/2022]

Abstract

Universities are taking on the increasing pressures to reform higher education systems and rethink institutional priorities in an increasingly globalized world. And they have embarked upon the process of "getting international" for students to become global citizens. As preconized by the UNESCO's concept paper on Higher Education "the globalisation of the world's economies and a growing acceptance that knowledge societies need highly skilled and competent knowledge workers" is at the core of HE debates.

As a result, English is increasingly becoming the dominant language in HE institutions, replacing other national and local languages. Language policy and language management in Higher Education has, therefore, become a source of concern for universities as the policies adopted may have direct consequences in terms of access to education for all, participation and inclusion. These consequences, however need to be thoroughly studied as these policies might be leaving both people and language communities behind.

This policy brief is aimed at analysing the current state of affairs on the increasing presence of English in HE institutions worldwide. It is divided into three sections. Firstly, it provides an overview of the current academic debates. Second, it analyses the close link between the language policies in HE to the UN's Sustainable 2030 Agenda, and lastly, it offers a set of concrete proposals and recommendations to ensure an equitable approach to multilingual policies in Higher Education.

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Content

Acronyms

HE: Higher Education

EMI: English as a Medium of Instruction

Introduction. The language debates in HE. A bird's-eye view

The world of higher education is changing at a rapid pace. Universities are taking on the pressure to reform higher education systems and rethink institutional priorities in an increasingly interconnected world. At the turn of the millennium, universities from all around the world have embarked upon the process of "getting international" for students to become "global citizens" (Vila & Bretxa, eds. 2015). UNESCO's concept note for 2022 World Higher Education Conference succinctly summarizes this trend: "The globalisation of the world's economies and a growing acceptance that knowledge societies need highly skilled and competent knowledge workers"[1].

The quest for "going international" has led to the blossoming of English-medium courses in countries where this language had not been often used (Brenn-White & van Res, 2012), sparking academic and policy debates on multilingualism – or to be more precise, the increasing use of English in replacement of other languages in Higher Education. Voices such as Gunnarsson (2001), Phillipson (2009) and many others denounce the progress of English at the expense of other languages while other scholars claim we should more cautious pointing to the specificities of the relationship between English and other languages in local contexts as it should not be forgotten that it is all languages that are being globalized (Blommaert, 2010).

While it is true that the internationalization debates and the role of English were initially focused on the European Nordic countries (e.g. Hultgren et al. 2014), they have become a source of concern in all corners of the world, including South Africa (Madiba, 2014), Latin America (Hamel, 2013), India (Groff, 2017), Saudi Arabia (Ryhan, 2014) and Europe, Vila & Breta (2015), among many other scholarly voices.

Universities are today under increasing pressure from seemingly opposed policy agendas. On the one hand, they are under increasing pressure to produce "highly skilled and competent knowledge workers", and thus adopting English as the language of international communication. On the other, universities have often been perceived as key national flagships, assets of the nation (Soler & Gallego-Balsà, 2019). Two seemingly opposing trends: the globalizing or internationalist versus the cultural or regionalist. As a result, different languages are positioned in ways that conflict, with a clash between languages of wider communication (basically English) and national/local languages, in what has been referred also as the *mobility vs inclusion trade-off*[2].

Managing these trends has become a major source of concern for HE institutions, governments and international organizations alike. As recently as February 2022, the Council of Europe adopted the [Recommendation CM(Rec)2022(1)] on the *importance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education for democratic Culture*, which urged Member States to "review their policies and practices to ensure students are equipped with the linguistic and cultural resources needed to participate in the democratic processes of Europe's diverse societies". Along these lines, the Council of the EU approved the [Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages] in 2019 as language skills are at the heart of the vision to create a [European Education Area]. The UNESCO Chair on Language Policies for

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[1] World Higher Education Conference WHEC2022 Reinventing Higher Education for a Sustainable Future, p.2
[2] For a full account of the mobility & inclusion concepts applied to multilingualism management, see the [MIME]

Vademecum, Mobility and Inclusion in a Multilingual Europe)

Multilingualism has placed this theme at the core of its policy agenda and so has the EUTOPIAEuropean University Alliance and its [Multilingualism & Diversity](#) Learning Community.

1. **Language Policy trends in Higher Education. Multilingualism as a synonym of "more English"?**

The increasing number of courses in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is having direct consequences in a variety of HE fields. For instance, with regard to teaching and learning activities a recent comparative overview of studies about EMI in the Nordic countries demonstrates that university students cope reasonably well with EMI, but they take more time to achieve similar results to L1 programmes (Airey et al. 2015). Moreover, some investigations of 2-year EMI Master's programmes in Finland indicate that students display problems in using conceptual language (Lehtonen et al. 2003).

In terms of quality of education in higher education, there are a number of studies about how university instructors cope with EMI as it depends on many factors. For example, in an early study of English-medium university courses in the Netherlands, Vinke et al. (1998: 391) demonstrated that "there is a distinct difference between (the experience of) conducting courses in English and in the mother tongue". Such a difference includes limitations in vocabulary, redundancy, clarity and accuracy of expression; a reduced ability to cope with unexpected issues that go beyond a lecturer's preparation for a given class; larger workload with regard to preparation time and (mental) energy; diminished self-esteem about the quality of one's own teaching; and increased importance of pedagogical skills. Also exploring English-medium courses in the Dutch university system, Klaassen (2001: 176) argued that teacher pedagogy – that is, student-centred teaching – trumps a lecturer's proficiency in English.

In terms of students' participation in the classroom, several studies (e.g. Vila & Bretxa, eds. 2015) point at a more limited comprehension and a lower class participation when students are compelled to participate in English (in non-Anglophone countries). In sum, using English as a medium of instruction is a complex undertaking that requires a high command of English on the part of both faculty and professors.

Another source of concern is the implication of the increasing use of English for research, publication or academic orientation. As indicated by Altbach & de Wit (2019), the consequences of the increasing use of English in research could be summarized as follows:

a) Studies show that the most highly cited journals and articles are in English. Academics from non-English environments are disadvantaged in several ways. Their facility in English, which is not their native language, will often be imperfect.

b) Lack of alignment with local needs and dominance of western paradigms in research.

c) English-medium international journals limit the possibilities to contribute to scientific debate in local languages for local communities. This is especially important in fields such as the humanities and social sciences, which are deeply rooted in multilingual and multicultural activities.

d) There is also a concern about the role of colonial languages in the developing world, and particularly in Africa. Local languages are used in public primary and secondary education, but, with some exceptions, not in higher education. The risks of such policies

are high: elitism in access of higher education; deterioration of quality of education andresearch; lack of alignment with local needs; and dominance of western paradigms.

2.   Linking Language Policies in HE to the 2030 Sustainable Agenda

Language is a major resource for indexing belonging and a gatekeeper for inclusion/exclusion between different groups. Although 'multilingualism in HE' is used to describe the international nature of modern institutions, we have seen that there is a hierarchy of languages. Language use in HE contexts is as political as in other domains of society. As highlighted by the United Nations' Leaving No-one Behind (LNOB) initiative, "Many of the barriers people face in accessing services, resources and equal opportunities are not simply accidents of fate or a lack of availability of resources, but rather the result of discriminatory laws, policies and social practices that leave particular groups of people further and further behind".

The increasing use of English in Higher Education is a planned, deliberate language policy that has consolidated over the past years in HE institutions around the world, under the alleged rhetoric of internationalisation, progress and excellence. The practical consequences, however, need to be thoroughly studied as these policies might be leaving both people and language communities behind.

The politics of multilingualism are rarely addressed in educational language policy documents, and this is the case for EU policy too. Language use and language choice in multilingual settings is a political act. Speakers through their choices perpetuate or challenge societal asymmetries; language choice and language use never take place in a power vacuum. Language policies in HE matter because the most disadvantaged groups in society tend to have least access to the dominant languages. Language use in HE contexts is, therefore, as political as in other domains of society and language varieties are part and parcel of the negotiation of power asymmetries between speakers of the languages that form each linguistic ecosystem.

As already analysed by S. Romaine (2016), as an increasing number of HE institutions turn to English as a medium of education, English becomes an essential basic skill that needs to be achieved. Where access to English is unequal, the gap between different students will widen. Under the rhetoric of excellence and internationalisation, some language policy choices might be achieving discrimination and exclusion. In sum, language policies in educational domains, and particularly HE which is our focus, must be revisited to ensure an equitable approach to multilingualism, a combination between the international and the local.

3.   Proposals for an inclusive and sustainable Multilingualism Policy in HE

The time is ripe to challenge this persistent multilingualism paradox; on the one hand multilingualism is associated with mobility, productivity and knowledge creation. On the other hand, our society and our institutions continue to operate on a monolingual ideal. We need a different framework to promote the importance of multilingual pedagogies for economic growth, global competitiveness, social cohesion, mobility and for unlocking our students' creative potential if we really want multilingual policies that societies will see relevant and which then HE institutions will be able to adopt and implement.

Revisiting language policies in Higher Education entails reconceptualising the concept of multilingualism itself, beyond than the sum of (more) English to the detriment of national language/s. With the exception of discipline specific debates (e.g., multilingual education has been receiving attention in linguistics and education studies see e.g., work in Wyse, Hayward, Pandya, 2015), multilingual education is still not widely discussed and language use is associated with proficiency, which is only a part of how speakers decide which variety is appropriate for what purpose. This also applies to multilingual pedagogies which are rare and generally not part of teacher training in most European countries – despite the significance of language for participation and inclusion to education and the diversity and change in the demographics that make the European classrooms.

We must adopt a dynamic, nuanced and politically informed definition of multilingualism, which will lead to a language policy that enables and empowers language users, and supports the development and application of multilingual pedagogies. The following proposals can help move the debates along these lines:

1. When dealing with the language policy of a particular HE institution, it is paramount to also consider the actual language practices that teachers and students are engaging in as well as the potentially different and conflicting communicative and academic aims agents might be pursuing (Dafouz and Smit, 2016). This means abandoning a static view of languages as bounded entities (English, Swedish, Dutch, etc.), which have been the way language management has been traditionally tackled in all education levels, and embracing instead a more dynamic perspective that focuses on ***linguistic repertoires***.

2. If we consider that the lack of language competences is one of the main barriers to participation in European education, training and mobility in the EU, we can easily infer that the ability to use one's linguistic repertoire and to develop one's multilingual competence constitute added value for students, researchers, and staff. The ability to use the various linguistic repertoires of students, researchers and staff makes the linguistic environment in HE open to embracing linguistic diversity, leaving no one behind and ensuring equal participation.

3. As Airey et al. (2015) propose: "it is not enough to simply incorporate generalized references to the language of instruction of the form 'in this course students will practice the use of disciplinary English'. Rather we suggest more specific references along the lines of ''in this course the following skills will be developed in the following language(s)'. We suggest, therefore, going from a static conception of multilingualism – understood as the sum of the languages of instruction as a static/rigid element– to a more dynamic, fluid conception of multilingual competences in a specific environment, that is, in a specific ***linguistic ecosystem***.

4. We argue that approaching and developing pedagogies for HE as a ***linguistic ecosystem*** can provide opportunities for speakers of different varieties to use their own linguistic resources in the process of their learning. This can then flatten hierarchies between varieties and 'legitimise', i.e. empower, students and staff in using the totality of their linguistic resource.

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5.   We are proposing a holistic and pragmatic view of language and language use in HE – one that recognises the complexities of language use between speakers of different varieties, some of which might be considered as less 'standard' or less 'valuable' than others. Put in other terms, we must explore the full potential of the linguistic repertoire of all stakeholders involved in HE institutions. This goes fully in line with the current trends and recommendations for reform of HE institutions, which encourage universities and other competent institutions and agencies to engage in research that contributes to international understanding of plurilingualism, intercultural dialogue and the linguistic repertoires of citizens at all educational levels and in all social domains.

6.   We do not suggest that HE should not develop students' proficiency in a given dominant language. To the contrary, all students should have access to the competences that are necessary for fully participating and growing academically, professionally and personally. However, ignoring and excluding the language capital of many students and staff is reducing the learning capacity and the capital those students bring to their own learning and to that of their peers. Further to this, multilingual pedagogies can enrich the diversification, decolonisation and decentralisation of HE curricula which is necessary for providing students an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of historical and synchronic asymmetries and ways to challenge the status quo.

7.   Language policies in HE should be conceptualized in a more context-sensitive way. Rather that formulation a one-size-fits-all (English) solutions, an equitable language policy needs to acknowledge the local language as well as the dynamics of social and geographical mobility giving rise to particular language repertoires. Considering this combination of "the local" and "the international", we aim to propose the principle of ***auto-centered multilingualism*** (Kraus, P.A: Climent-Ferrando, 2018, et.al.). Applied to HE language policies, it aims to tackle the trade-off between mobility and inclusion, between the international and the local languages. Under this principle, the local languages must occupy a central position in HE public institutions as their main purpose is to serve the society they are in. At the same time, the linguistic repertoire of students must also be valorised and used, as well as English.

From this perspective, a dynamic, nuanced and politically informed definition of multilingualism should lead to a language policy that enables and empowers language users, and supports the development and application of multilingual pedagogies. work (Gumperz, 1982) has argued long ago that the use of language (and of given language varieties) in a way that is considered appropriate and can secure access to resources is related to social and political knowledge and power structures that go beyond language understood as a system of meaning-making signs.

Universities are rich linguistic ecosystems in which multiple linguistic varieties are in contact and co-exist. Some varieties are more prominent than others and hold symbolic roles as language/s of instruction, of majority communities or of high prestige. As they become more globally oriented, the linguistic complexity increases. HE institutions must ensure that the language policies adopted are aimed at ensuring equal opportunities, services and resources for the society they serve while engaging in international research and networks of excellence. Their policies and practices must ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary linguistic and cultural resources needed to fully participate in today's interconnected societies.

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