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## **Towards the Multilingual and Multicultural Learning Space: the Case of Latvia**

### **ABSTRACT**

Language issues within the higher education sector have taken the central position in view of the current internationalization trend. Language policy in European higher education institutions is impacted by current trends in commerce, science, and culture, as well as the guidelines provided in numerous documents issued by the Council of Europe emphasizing the centrality of languages within higher education curricula. Therefore, the research topicality is determined by the indispensable and urgent necessity to explore the potential and the actual state of internationalization process implementation in the sector of higher education in Latvia placing language issues (global and local language/-s) as the main research focus.

The article reports the findings of the survey conducted applying the questionnaire and focus-group discussion as data collection methods stating the strengths and challenges of Latvian internationalization scenarios focusing on issues related to language studies for both students and academic staff.

**Key words:** *higher education internationalization, multilingual and multicultural learning space, languages, curriculum, faculty staff's professional development*

### **Introduction**

The domain of higher education and the institutions providing higher education have focused on the dimension of internationalization within their activities for centuries. For instance, higher education institutions in medieval Europe have put much effort into attracting foreign students and promotion of academic staff mobility.

Throughout history, this objective has been challenged by different events (e.g. the Protestant Reformation, the formation of the nation-state, etc.), still, at present, the domain of higher education has regained and strengthened its international scope and direction, which is enhanced by the Information and Communication Technologies, the knowledge economy; increased mobility for

students, faculty, programmes, and providers; and an integrated world economy (Knight, 2004; 2008, etc.).

In the last decades, the European higher education landscape has undergone profound transformations. The reasons are diverse, however, the development of the European Higher Education Area and the introduction and promotion of the European Commission's programmes that support student and staff mobility have led to the ever strongest emphasis on the dimension of internationalization within higher education for all the parties involved in the activities and processes.

The article introduces the selected findings of the study conducted in the framework of Doctoral research "Foreign Language Studies in the Context of Higher Education Internationalization in Latvia" (author: A. Stavicka; scientific advisor: I. Odiņa; University of Latvia, 2015).

### **Theoretical Background**

The trend to put the **language** as the core subject of inquiry within the higher education internationalization after 2000 is clearly visible. The sources dealing directly with language and its place, role and function in the context of internationalization and globalization include such issues as the **English language as a global language, English as a Lingua Franca, English for scientific and**

**global communication**, etc. The sources dealing with language issues in the context of internationalization of higher education address a wide array of questions starting with language planning and language policies and up to teaching methodology. It is not surprising that English as a global language and the lingua franca for many (or even most of) professional fields, as well as its impact on the use of local languages are assigned a special place within the most current research to. The theoretical sources provide accounts on the implications of the dominance of English for higher education, science and research as well as the whole of the society providing examples of the case studies from across the world. Besides the debates on the role of English in the modern world, leading scholars (e.g. Ammon, 2001; Barry, 2002; Ferguson, 2004) sharply argue on the relations between the educational objectives and the place of languages within the curriculum. Exploring a wide range of topics, from the globalization of communication to the professional discourse, authors consider the implications of the changes in the educational paradigm rooted in the internationalization of higher education. The authors (e.g. Ammon, 1998, 2000; Crystal, 2003) provide authoritative reports on the ways in which language is changing, and in turn, changes the users of a language/languages. Sources shed light upon the latest research and insights from linguistics (esp. applied linguistics), studies on

educational policies and strategies as concerns the planning and implementation of language studies resulting in the synthesis of language education practices from across the world (e.g. Ferguson, 2004; Kaplan, 2001).

As concerns issues related to **languages** as a research interest within the Latvian scholarly community, the issues of the local language maintenance and promotion, as well as dissemination of correct usage, including translation and localization of professional terminology are viewed as the ones of fundamental importance. Another research direction, which reiterates the most recent concerns of authorities involved in the promotion of common European education space, is bilingualism, multilingualism and their promotion, the emphasis on the development of language skills and competences within the diverse world linguistic landscape, which are viewed as the issues of fundamental topicality both in Latvia and worldwide. Latvian scholars have contributed to the understanding of the situation within the Latvian linguistic landscape (e.g. Druviete, 1997, 1999, 2000; Valdmanis, 2012; Balodis, et al., 2011; Kļava, Valdmanis, 2012; etc.). Latvian scholars rightly admit that the language policy in Latvia is implemented in the generally complex linguistic situation, for within the Latvian setting, at least, two other major languages are

present - the English and Russian languages. They also highlight that the English language has been assigned a special role to also within the Latvian community (e.g. Druviete, 2014). Latvian scholars also acknowledge the necessity to assess the state of affairs as concerns the implementation of language policy in the HE sector in Latvia. The same as the authors from the wider world scholarly community, Latvian scholars are concerned with the issues related to professional discourse, specialist terminology, the promotion of consistency in the use of professional language, local language maintenance and promotion, as the English language being the source language for many professional terms has impact on the use of local language/languages within the professional communication.

### **Research Methodology**

The objective of the survey conducted applying the questionnaire and focus-group discussion as data collection methods was to identify Latvian higher education (HE) setting for the international higher education institution (HEI) with the view to identify the strengths and challenges of Latvian internationalization scenarios focusing on issues related to language studies for both students and academic staff.

### **Questionnaire Survey: Research Procedure**

To obtain the data necessary for the research purposes, a questionnaire aimed at identifying various types of settings (scenarios) within the higher education sector in Latvia and exploration of practices and identification of challenges within these scenarios later used as the basis for focus-group discussion with experts.

The present methodology was agreed upon the experts in the framework of the IntlUni project “The Challenges of the Multilingual and Multicultural Learning Space” (An ERASMUS Academic Network – 1 October 2012 – 30 September 2015: 526646-LLP-1-2012-1-DK-ERASMUS-ENW). The network has grown out of a Special Interest Group under the European Language Council (CEL – ELC). It has 38 partners in 27 countries.

The questionnaire comprising 86 questions was designed and piloted in the framework of the IntlUni project followed by the documentary analysis of HEIs’ websites.

The quantitative and qualitative data for the Latvian sample were collected and processed by the authors of the article and were not used for the purposes of the IntlUni project.

The working definitions stated were provided alongside with the guidelines for completing the questionnaire. The concepts relevant for the discussion of the issue under investigation were also introduced and discussed with the respondents.

Seven Latvian HEIs were explored in the framework of the research with the aim to state, analyze and identify the strengths and challenges which need to be addressed within the implementation of the internationalization strategies.

The questionnaire was sent or distributed personally to the representatives of HEIs under investigation. A total of 108 complete responses from seven individual higher education institutions were received. The number of responses received differed across the institutions. The questionnaires were administered in the three main ways:

- Self-completion. 50 out of 108 respondents filled in the responses by themselves.
- Face-to-face interview. In 48 cases, the researcher asked questions in the presence of the respondents, and completed the questionnaire.
- Telephone-Internet interview. In 10 cases, the researcher contacted the respondents by phone or internet applications (e.g. Skype), put forward the questions and recorded the responses.

The questionnaires were filled either on behalf of the higher education institution (HEI) for the university as a whole or for the faculty / school / main academic area, which was clearly stated. The respondents were asked to provide

the answers on behalf of the chosen unit, the whole HEI or the specific faculty/unit.

The **response rate** constituted 85 per cent (108 filled in questionnaires out of 127), which is viewed as adequate response rate (Fowler, 1993).

The **research sample** addressed in the framework of the study of the case of Latvia comprised the representatives of the following groups within the higher education sector: Director of study or programme coordinator; Lecturer (home lecturer/teacher); Lecturer (international lecturer/teacher); Language teacher, Director, International office; Staff, International office; Director of language centre; Director of special programmes for international students; Head of department; Teacher trainer; Educational developer; Representative of students' union. The possibility to choose more than one option was provided, as some of the respondents held several positions in their institutions.

### **Focus-group Discussion: Research Procedure**

A focus-group discussion with 11 experts to receive expert evaluation of the data obtained with the help of the questionnaire and documentary analysis of HEIs websites, as well as to amplify and gain deeper understanding of the findings was conducted. The sample of the focus-group was the individuals affiliated to different HEIs, representing different scientific

and subject areas, as well as performing different positions within their HEIs. The appropriateness of the sample was determined by the degree to which it permitted the researchers to confirm the categories marked within the questionnaire and documentary analysis. The focus-group discussion was moderated by the researcher through putting forward questions relevant in the research perspective and raising relevant themes. The qualitative deductive content analysis of the data was performed.

The findings of the focus-group discussion were integrated into the findings obtained with the help of the questionnaire.

### **Research Findings and Discussion**

To build the grounds for the exploration of the language profiles in HEIs under investigation, the question was put forward whether **the HEI had a written and officially adopted HEI-wide language policy**. The existence of an institutional language policy represents a crucial indicator for progression in institutional internationalization. Therefore, it is apparent that an overarching issue of importance within the higher education sector is whether aspects of internationalization have been formalized into an institutional language policy or strategy.

Analyzing the responses, the conclusion was drawn that more than half (59.9%) of the

respondents admitted that they did not have any official language policy, while 40.4% confessed they did not know whether their institution had such a policy or not.

However, the findings of the **focus-group discussion** demonstrated that the data obtained were compelling, as the respondents participating in the focus-group discussion suggested that it could be the case that language policy issues were incorporated in numerous different documents, while one single united document on language policy within a HEI might not exist. The respondents claimed that even though in many cases language policy issues had been formalized, the information available was inconsistent and fragmentary, which led to questionnaire respondents' inability to clearly state the tenets regarding the language policy in their institutions.

All the participants of the focus-group discussion agreed that the HEIs in Latvia mostly grounded their language practices in the general language policy at work in Latvia (e.g. State Language Law, etc.), as well as guidelines and European strategic documents.

For instance, all the respondents admitted that they had encountered requirements regarding language proficiency in their position descriptions, however, the general landscape of language needs within the higher education sector or a unit as such was still unclear. This could partly account for the problem of the lack of promotional activities regarding the

questions and tenets of institutional language policy.

The respondents agreed that an important step towards the development of language policy within the institution was raising awareness of the need to develop one. They suggested that promotional activities were necessary to discuss significant issues within the context of internationalization of higher education, including or even emphasizing the language issues. At individual level, the respondents admitted that their own professional practice was frequently based on particular objectives, often defined as strategies, at work in the institutions they were affiliated to. For instance, some took a bilingual perspective, dealing with the relationship between the Latvian language and another language, usually specified as English. This was a comment posed by the lecturer working in the field of ICT. He said that "*maintaining the bilingual perspective is the only possible way within his scientific domain, as the majority of, if not all, the terms within his professional domain come from the English-speaking world, so while emphasizing the use of the local equivalents, the original terms are still English in his classroom*". The fact that the English language was specified in the full majority of cases was not surprising. Others had a multilingual profile, and here the focus might be on students. Among the other crucial aspects regarding the institutional language

policy, such aspects as HEI institutional language/languages and the languages of administration and communication; language degree programmes and provision of language courses for non – language students; languages for mobility and career – the language(s) of instruction and language support for lecturers not teaching through the medium of their own first languages in view of the direction towards the international learning space; language support for researchers; language support for technical and administrative staff; languages for the wider community.

The reference points identified in the discussion framework well illustrates the strong link between the political stance on language issues and levels of policy-making in HEI. It is apparent that discourses on languages and their use in the higher education sector (as well as other sectors) are highly political.

Several questions were asked to explore the situation with study programmes concerning the languages of instruction other than the official state language. The questions were posed to find out whether HEIs implemented programmes in languages other than the official language(s) of the country or region, how many students enrolled in such programmes, and whether home students and the international students within the three cycles (BA, MA, PhD) enrolled in the same courses/different courses.

Regarding the sample selected for the analysis, the data revealed that the Latvian language was used as the dominant medium of instruction in the majority of institutions selected for the sample. The dominating ideology was supported in the mission statements of HEIs (e.g. “*the cultivation of Latvian language and culture*”, “*strengthening the traditions of cultural cooperation*”). However, all the HEIs in the selected sample offered a wide range of all level study programmes for international students. The majority of the HEIs implemented international study programmes in the English language (6 out of 7 HEIs). Within the selected research sample, only one HEI claimed to offer programmes in students’ heritage languages. (By heritage language a student’s first language (mother tongue) even though the student may have grown up in a country where this language is not the first language is understood.) The respondents affiliated to one of the higher education institutions which fell into the category of *Juridical Persons Established Institutions of Higher Education* stated that their institution offered programmes with the Russian medium instruction. The respondents claimed that, in fact, all of the programmes were available in the official state language – the Latvian language and the Russian language. The data revealed that the majority of programmes were also available in the English

language, as well as some other languages (e.g. Polish).

Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that none of the state-funded higher education institutions in the selected sample provided programmes in language minority students' heritage languages (the specialized language programmes make the exception, however, they cannot be seen as the programmes designed specifically for the promotion of minority heritage languages).

The exploration of the official websites of the institutions under analysis confirmed the questionnaire data. EMI (English Medium Instruction) programmes are obviously becoming more and more popular, but still there is room for improvement. The Europe 2014-2020 strategy most probably will contribute to institutional developments in this perspective.

Based on the research findings for the present category of questions, the conclusion can be drawn that all the HEIs within the selected sample acknowledge the importance of the international dimension within their activities. Crucial steps towards raising the competitiveness level through the implementation of international programmes in foreign languages are made.

### **Language Support Provision to Students and Lecturers**

A number of questions addressed the crucial issues of support mechanisms for students and staff in relation to teaching and learning within the context of internationalization of HE.

The data revealed that all the HEI presented in the Latvian sample offered mandatory language courses as part of the curriculum, optional language courses as part of the curriculum and language courses outside the curriculum. However, the data obtained revealed that none of the HEIs offered mandatory courses in academic writing as part of the curriculum, which could be viewed as a serious challenge and obstacle for students to comply with the requirement generally set for students to write a research paper upon the graduation from a programme at all educational levels (first-, second-, third-cycle education), as the requirement for graduation in Latvia is to write a final (e.g. BA, MA, PhD paper) research paper in all the academic and professional domains. This allows for the conclusion that the role of academic writing skills is undervalued which leads to poor quality of academic writing and thus scientific communication. The awareness of this problem should be raised and the necessity to introduce such courses should be recognized by those involved in the development of the study content.

To proceed to details, the full majority of the respondents admitted that they had special provisions, such as language courses, for home students. The data obtained revealed that, within the first-cycle education (e.g. BA level), the English language courses were mandatory within the majority of the study programmes implemented, while for the second- and third-cycle studies, the situation was different.

Based on the data obtained in the framework of the focus-group discussion, it may be assumed that despite the apparent and recognized role of language studies in education, languages were paid insufficient attention to within the second- and third-cycle studies. The participants of the focus-group discussion admitted that *“unfortunately, despite the obvious significance of developing, for instance, academic writing skills in both the native and foreign languages, this aspect is frequently omitted within the educational process”*. This was one of the reasons for poor quality of scientific communication, as stated by the respondents. Another comment stated that *“despite the fact, that Latvian students are obliged to produce a research paper as one of the requirements for successful graduation from a study programme at all study levels, students’ academic writing skills are taken for granted”*. This issue requires urgent attention from the responsible parties (e.g. programme directors, etc.)

One of the respondents mentioned that domain-specific foreign language studies would be the beneficial development within the unit he was affiliated to. Others said that foreign language studies should be granted more credits and therefore devoted more time to. Two respondents stated that nowadays young people were exposed to real, authentic language in the media – *“their situation is much more beneficial as compared to older generations”*. One respondent confessed that *“we can never compete with the new generation in the language questions, as they acquire languages in the natural way already in the childhood while watching cartoons, films, etc.”*

In general, all the respondents acknowledged that support mechanisms aimed at international students were at work in their HEIs. They reported that support mechanism was usually provided by international offices, however the international offices were not the only units aiming to “make the life of students easier” and help students integrate into the new unfamiliar environment, adjust to new circumstances, decrease the stress associated with, for instance, cultural differences, unfamiliar teaching and learning cultures, means of assessment, etc. Formally, these measures included introduction courses, orientation weeks, handbooks (guides for students), online resources and buddy systems, Erasmus student networks, individual

consultation, social and cultural activities and establishment of cross-cultural groups in the classroom, as stated by the respondents. Such measures were overwhelmingly optional in character and most or some of the students took advantage of the opportunities on offer.

The majority of the respondents stated that their institutions offered language courses for international students in the local language (the Latvian language). Some institutions also offered courses in the English language aimed at international students.

Moreover, individual attempts to meet students' needs were also obvious. This way the participants of the focus group discussion claimed to pay special attention to international students in their groups. However, those attempts were frequently decentralized, e.g., lecturers addressed international students personally by asking if they needed any help. The same referred to local students. The respondents' comments revealed that local students were generally open for questions, eager to assist and provide help or support to international students.

Certainly, measures such as introduction courses/weeks tend to be segregated, being organized specifically for international students. Some respondents refer to the social behaviour of students where international students and home students rarely mix.

The data obtained with the help of the questionnaire revealed that HEIs organized

Open Days providing the opportunity to visit a HEI and get the necessary information.

The Orientation Weeks were organised for international students including activities, such as signing the study agreement as well as general social activities - getting to know new people, parties, etc. Buddy system was a well-established practice in Latvian HEIs.

The full majority of HEIs (all the 7 HEIs) have developed survival guides for international students covering the basic information on the studies and life in Latvia.

To build international reputation, some of the HEIs promoted their names in the global arena through, for instance, organization of Summer Schools in different up-to-date topics, as well as language courses.

### **Students' and Academic Staff's Language Proficiency**

A number of questions were aimed at the exploration of the respondents' opinions on students' and staff's language proficiency. Although the use of the term *sufficient* applied to language proficiency in the questionnaire did not predetermine the statement of criteria behind the interpretation of the term, it was purposefully chosen in order to explore respondents' subjective perception of their own, students' and educators' language proficiency.

91 out of 108 respondents stated that their students had a sufficient level of proficiency in

the language(s) of instruction. That would mean that even in the case when the language of instruction was the official language, the command of the official language was far from being evaluated as sufficient. One of the possible explanations could be that certain number of students had attended a minority school with the language of instruction other than the official language of the country.

Two questions were posed to find out whether students in HEIs, according to the respondents' viewpoint, had a sufficient level of academic reading in the language(s) of instruction or language(s) of the textbooks and a sufficient level of academic writing in the language(s) of instruction.

The data received for these questions could be described as a precarious situation, as only 42 respondents out of 108 believed that most of their students had a sufficient level of academic writing skills. As the data revealed, the courses aimed at the development of students' academic writing generally did not exist. Such courses did not also make a part of the secondary school curriculum, which could be the reason, or at least one of the reasons, for students' poor academic writing skills.

The data on students' level of academic reading should also be taken a grave view of, as 63 respondents stated that students' proficiency in the academic reading in the language(s) of instruction was sufficient, while only 52

respondents, which was less than a half, believed that students' academic reading skills in the language or languages of textbooks was sufficient. The comments provided by the respondents of the questionnaire revealed that this situation mostly referred to students' ability to read in foreign languages.

The respondents participating in the focus-group discussion noted that it should be acknowledged that different disciplines there might have different language proficiency requirements. This idea might refer to the knowledge of discipline-specific discourse, terminology, etc. It is apparent that most students do not enter university with "ready-made" proficiency in the academic language of their discipline(s). This aspect should be taken into account when designing study programmes.

Regarding the opinions on the lecturers' and other teaching staff's language proficiency in the language(s) of instruction, the data obtained revealed that the majority of the respondents (95 respondents out of 108) believed that the teaching staff's language proficiency was appropriate to fulfil their professional responsibilities. Still, the comments showed that these data might be attributed to the cases when the language of instruction was the official state language, as comments provided within the questionnaires, showed that foreign languages were not among

the professional strengths of the teaching staff. This was confirmed by the finding that the full majority of the HEIs explored (7 out of 7 HEIs) did not set the requirement for the faculty members to pass any foreign language proficiency test or other means of assessment of foreign language proficiency. The respondents, commenting on the data in the framework of the focus-group discussion, admitted that, regarding the international lecturers or guest lecturers, this aspect had probably been formalized into the requirements set for professionals in their own countries and/or institutions. Therefore, they assumed that there was no need to test international or visiting faculty members' language proficiency. All of the respondents admitted that within their position requirements, the issues related to language proficiency were paid attention to. However, none of the respondents said they had ever been asked to prove their language proficiency level. When asked whether testing faculty members' proficiency was necessary, two respondents suggested that such testing was not necessary, as it was the question of professionalism which was acknowledged in their academic and scholarly activities.

Students participating in the focus group discussion said that, in general, they did not find fault with their lecturers' language proficiency. However, students confessed that they had the experience when "*a teacher used*

*poor language*". The respondent stated that this fact affected her motivation in a negative way. The respondents of the focus-group discussion agreed this question should be considered. One of the respondents admitted that "*it is unfair. Students have to face certain requirements, while teachers' professionalism is taken for granted*".

The data obtained revealed that 5 out of 7 HEIs did not offer language courses for lecturers in foreign languages. However, some of the questionnaire respondents provided further comments: "*I have heard something about courses for lecturers, but I don't know what exactly it was all about*". "*I know that our unit offers some courses for professional development, but I am not sure whether these are language courses or some other courses*". Such comments could partially explain the situation. It might be the case that language courses in foreign languages aimed at faculty staff did exist, but they were not promoted, therefore, some of the lecturers willing to participate in them did not know who to turn to. Another reason could be the working load of academic staff. They might be (or thought that they were) too busy and did not have time for attending such courses – "*I have huge loads of work and do not have time to participate in such courses*".

The most painful questions for the participants of the focus-group discussion appeared to be the issues linked to professional

foreign language proficiency and the impact of the spread of English as the lingua franca in the international scientific community. The fundamental ideological question widely discussed in the theoretical literature was raised, as well as the question set by one of the respondents in the focus-group: “*Could it be the case that we have concentrated too much on publishing our research results in the international editions and thus in the language of international communication (English)? How does it impact the state of awareness of the research and local achievements among our own local population?*” This kind of interrogation was neither new nor unique to the case of Latvia, as this issue was widely discussed worldwide. The most reasonable solution found for this was “*the struggle to maintain reasonable balance*” as stated by one of the respondents within the focus-group discussion and supported by the whole group. The conclusion was drawn that it was not enough just to discuss these issues and to agree upon them. The action which has to be taken is the statement of these values in official documentation in HEIs.

The data obtained revealed that none of the HEIs explored offered courses to the international lecturers in the official language of the country. As concerns the special measures for teaching staff not familiar with the local teaching and learning environment and assessment procedures, 82 respondents out of

108 reported that no such measures had been implemented. It should be highlighted that the answers received did not necessarily imply that no measures were taken and no support to international lecturers was provided. Still, the data obtained were crucial in the sense that the results once again confirmed the necessity to raise awareness of such issues, discuss them, familiarize the faculty staff with the opportunities.

### **Conclusions**

The exploration of language profiles of HEIs and language practices within the HEIs led to the conclusion that internationalization of higher education implied certain changes and developments to facilitate the successful implementation of the international dimension within the higher education in Latvia. Languages play a particularly crucial role within the processes related to internationalization. It is apparent that teaching and learning (e.g. using resources in English, etc.) through a foreign language increases the cognitive load of both educators and students. In addition, both educators and students need to effectively function in a cognitively and conceptually demanding subject-specific academic language. These challenges are increased by the differences in not only *ethnic* and *local* cultures, but also in *academic* cultures and practices and *disciplinary* cultures in HEI contexts.

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