

Mark Critchley* and Jocelyn Wyburd

Evolution of university internationalisation strategies and language policies: challenges and opportunities for language centres

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore how language centres can and need to seize the initiative in matters of internationalisation, language policy and supporting a multilingual and multicultural institutional environment. We identify and explore a number of challenges and opportunities, using the situation in the United Kingdom as our example, demonstrating how language centres can evidence their existing contribution to a wider interpretation of internationalisation than is often found within university international strategies. In that context, we explore the skillset of the ‘global graduate’ to which language centres can contribute extensively. We demonstrate how language centres can contribute to the achievement of research excellence in an international higher education environment and the dimensions of institutional language policies within the context of a global university. Finally, we share the AULC manifesto for the role of language centres within global universities and propose that CercleS might elaborate a similar manifesto to raise the profile of language centres at the heart of higher education internationalisation.

Keywords: global citizenship; internationalisation; language centres; language policy; multilingualism



1 Introduction

For UK Universities, internationalisation has long been focused on: a) the recruitment of students from outside the United Kingdom, and b) the development of international partnerships for research and education. On occasion, this

***Corresponding author: Mark Critchley**, Durham University, Durham, UK,

E-mail: mark.critchley@durham.ac.uk

Jocelyn Wyburd, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, E-mail: jmw234@cam.ac.uk

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has included the establishment of overseas campuses, trans-national education programmes or overseas recruitment offices. The drivers for these strategies are primarily focused on reputation and brand, trading on and furthering the universities' international excellence in research. Often an institution will define itself as a 'global university' or as aspiring to be one. Clearly, the other major strategic driver for this internationalisation is economic, derived from the higher financial returns possible from international student fee income.

However, language policy has remained largely absent, with an assumed monolingual approach using only English. Meanwhile, across Europe, many Universities have mature language policies. With growth in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), some of these language policies reflect a situation where native language(s) + English predominate.

The challenge is to identify how language centres (and their programmes) can influence a broadening of the concept of internationalisation, and furthermore to play a leading role in initiatives to internationalise the university as a space of study and work.

The position and perceived role of language centres within their own universities may be considered as an obstacle to having influence on university policy. Whether in the UK or elsewhere, language centres are frequently categorised as service departments whose main aim may be the delivery of academic English to international students for EMI purposes. Alternatively, or additionally, they may deliver teaching in national languages for academic purposes, to support the social and cultural integration of international students, and the delivery of what is often classed as 'elective' study of a language other than English. Exceptions do of course exist. Nevertheless, our discussions with colleagues across the CercleS community confirm this profile and the fact that most do not usually have an established strategic role in respect of internationalisation within their university.

However, we propose that language centres do have several opportunities to influence their institutional internationalisation strategies. These include the following, each of which is considered in more detail below:

- Encouragement and facilitation of plurilingualism for global citizenship
- Developing language skills to support research
- Developing inter-cultural competence and awareness for staff and students
- Internationalising the curriculum
- Supporting student mobility
- Developing the university's global culture
- Supporting the development of institutional language policies

2 Encouragement and facilitation of plurilingualism for global citizenship

A ‘global university’ will also claim that it produces ‘global graduates’ or ‘global citizens’. It is therefore important to unpack what these terms mean, and how the attributes that constitute a global graduate are developed, whether passively or actively. In our experience, assumptions are sometimes made that global graduates are the automatic product of a multinational student and staff base. On the other hand, universities will attempt to use outward mobility and strategies to internationalise their curricula to develop global attributes in their students. Yet the acquisition of language and intercultural communication skills, beyond the acquisition of English, may be a secondary consideration in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts due to what we would argue are mis-perceptions about the role of English as a global *lingua franca*.

In some cases, universities may offer explicit global citizenship programmes, in concert with international partners. One such example is that developed by the Matariki network¹ developed to help their communities to face “complex societal and global challenges” and “to meet and address the emerging questions of the 21st Century” via a “variety of multi-institutional activities in education, research and engagement”. These are clearly laudable aims. However, the objectives appear to be more focussed towards an understanding of complex global challenges through the work of international teams, rather than explicitly addressing the ‘soft skills’ required by individuals to negotiate and communicate effectively as global citizens.

Drawing on evidence from UK business and graduate recruiters, the 2011 *Global Graduates into Global Leaders* report includes a ranked list of 14 “global competencies” (NCUB 2011: 8). Multilingualism is at no. 11, but higher up these include “an ability to embrace multiple perspectives and challenge thinking; and an openness to and respect for a range of perspectives from around the world”. Several others incorporate cross-cultural and multi-cultural dimensions as well as “multi-cultural learning agility.” These competencies are summarised in a framework (2011: 12) under three inter-related headings of “Cultural Agility”, “Global Mindset” and “Relationship Management”, underpinned by the core competencies of “learning agility” and “adaptability”. Each has more specific overarching competencies such as resilience, multilingualism, multicultural knowledge, social etiquette, negotiating, influencing and leading teams and empathy.

1 <https://www.matarikinetwerk.org/education/matariki-global-citizenship-programme/>.

It could thus be argued that, while addressing global challenges from the perspective of the academic discipline is important, being a global graduate/global citizen is as much about the inter-personal skills which will help individuals to work globally in cooperation; to take all perspectives and points of view into account; to communicate with cultural sensitivity; and to be agile, adaptable and resilient in preparing for employability in a global economy. Language centres are extremely well placed to support the development of many of the skills enumerated in the NCUB report, and to demonstrate to their universities the contributions they therefore make to the development of global graduates, through their programmes and their support for student outward mobility, multilingualism and inter-cultural competence.

English has become the global *lingua franca* of international academia, with the growth of EMI and English-medium academic publications and, indeed dominates in fields of global trade, diplomacy and international relations. As a result, Anglophone (and indeed many non-Anglophone) universities do not prioritise the development of language and intercultural skills in languages other than English. However, having ‘only English’ is limiting to a university’s ability to tackle the global research challenges mentioned above, given that these are largely situated outside the Anglophone world, and while the global economy spans more than the Anglosphere. Numerous studies have also demonstrated how ‘only English’ limits the communicative effectiveness of English mother tongue speakers in international business and international relations, as demonstrated by Jenkins (2018).

Hence, the assertion in the briefing paper produced by the League of European Research Universities (LERU)² on Language Policies in their member institutions that:

it must be a key interest of [...] Universities to form rounded student personalities and to graduate future mediators between cultures in a globalised world. For this purpose each additional language that they speak, or at least understand, will be an asset. (Kortmann 2019)

3 Language skills to support research

While English dominates as the *lingua franca* of international research outputs and publications, as Manuel Célio Conceição, then president of the CEL/ELC emphasised at the CercleS 2016 conference:

² <https://www.leru.org/>.

Language is a construction or expression of knowledge and identities. Failure to take into account plurilingual nature of research teams limits the research being undertaken in its construct and dissemination. Use of a single language will fail to maintain equity amongst students and staff, and could stifle creativity. Research must be a multilingual and multicultural endeavour.³

Furthermore, whilst English may dominate today, this will not necessarily remain so in the future, and it is vital that researchers question its impact on research output, and are aware that its dominance over research activity may allow for only a very specific way of looking at the world. Today's international research environment requires researchers to have the necessary skills to perform in multinational, multilingual and multicultural research teams which includes, to a greater or lesser extent, having competence in languages other than English. In many disciplines, language skills are essential in order to access research sources, both spoken and textual, in a variety of languages both for their intrinsic value to the research topic and to gain wider perspectives. This applies as much to historical studies, as it does to research into contemporary global challenges. Alongside these reading and listening skills, researchers frequently require oral skills to conduct fieldwork internationally, in order to gain the trust of local communities and/or for primary research purposes. The role that language centres play in supporting their universities' research excellence through provision of tailored opportunities to develop these skills is often not recognised unless centres articulate it as an explicit contribution to university research strategies.

4 Intercultural competence and awareness for staff and students

Universities are increasingly multicultural environments. Generating a valuable economic contribution, the integration of international students into their new community needs to be supported, including their welfare needs, and often to overcome some linguistic deficit, mainly in academic English. What may be ignored in this deficit model is the rich cultural asset that they also represent, which could be celebrated and more frequently taken advantage of, and from which the entire community can gain valuable multicultural understanding. This can also offer explicit opportunities for home students to learn about diverse worldviews and to develop intercultural communication skills.

3 http://www.cla.unical.it/CercleS2016/day_2.html accessed 14/12/2020.

Meanwhile, the multicultural university also increasingly has a highly international staff base, recruiting the top researchers from a global talent pool, and reflecting staff diversity. Universities will naturally use data on their diverse faculty base to demonstrate their international outlook and excellence. The challenge is then to capitalise on this global mindset across all staff in the university, particularly those who are teaching, managing or supporting international colleagues and students. Language centres therefore have a role to play as hubs, meeting points for intercultural exchange for both staff and students, offering programmes and activities that bring together those of different nationalities to enrich the cultural landscape of the institution.

5 Internationalising teaching and the curriculum

Universities already engage to a greater or lesser extent in several strategies, including promoting opportunities for outward mobility and international exchanges. More could be done to maximise on the contributions of international student perspectives and knowledge to teach programmes and to maximise on the contributions international staff can make to diversifying curricula to include wider perspectives. Language centres, meanwhile, deliver courses to cohorts of multiple nationalities and mother tongues, therefore actively facilitating both multilingualism and multicultural exchange, alongside core subjects of study. Other initiatives, such as movements to internationalise, diversify and/or 'decolonise' the content of taught programmes are growing in momentum. These include pressure to incorporate historiography from the perspectives of colonial subjects, diversifying literary studies beyond the outputs of 'dead white males' or studying Asian economic models which differ entirely from those of western economies. However, what such curriculum development often lacks is any explicit integration of intercultural competence, or even of language skills development into the teaching of history, literature or economics. This is another area where language centres have much to contribute.

6 Supporting outward mobility

We have already considered how universities might use outward mobility as a strand of their internationalisation strategy, and how experiences gained via outward mobility can contribute to a student's global graduate profile. In the UK, which has relatively low take up of mobility programmes, the major barrier is

linguistic. The support of outward mobility therefore requires that language learning is made as accessible as possible.

Through language centres, universities should systematically offer workshops to promote and prepare students for mobility, including the development of multicultural understanding and cross-cultural communication skills. More could potentially be done to bring together international students, and those who have returned from abroad, with those who are considering these options, in structured dialogues to break down cultural barriers and diversify perspectives. Such activities, in turn, could drive greater take-up of language learning opportunities. It could be argued that students already want and expect barriers to be minimised, if we consider the perspective of an employer:

I think we're starting to see in a particular generation, where they think of themselves as quite literally world citizens. I don't mean conceptually. I mean they see the world as boundary-less, that they are able to move, shift, work anywhere, and do anything. (NCUB 2011: 8)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, mobility has been seriously curtailed. Building on the agility and creativity demonstrated by language centres in moving their courses online, there is increasing momentum to develop more virtual exchanges, to increase the use of e-tandem schemes and to provide more flexible access to language centre courses, unconstrained by geography. Remote staff exchanges are also possible, shadowing the teaching of colleagues from other countries by dialling into their *Zoom* class or delivering directly to students in another university, and via virtual workshops for participants of different countries. An interesting challenge is how universities and their language centres can capitalise on expertise gained this year to internationalise the student body and student experiences through maximal exploitation of virtual environments.

7 Developing the university's global culture

Let us now consider how a language centre contributes to their university's global culture. They have traditionally operated as physical multilingual and multicultural spaces. Today (particularly in light of COVID-19) language classes might be available both face-to-face and 'remote'. They are increasingly distributing learning outside the classroom to students wherever they are (via apps, *Zoom*, online resources etc.). In addition, they may operate language cafés, conversation clubs, cultural events; they may support student societies, bringing international and home students together in an 'active student civil society'. Furthermore, the

languages being taught or supported are increasingly diverse including so-called ‘world’ and ‘heritage’ languages.

Language centres serve both students and staff and, often, the wider community beyond the university campus, not least in many contexts responding directly to an influx of refugees. Language centres do not only teach language skills, but also offer workshops on intercultural communication skills and provide training in academic literacies and skills, particularly but not exclusively for international students (e.g. through writing centres). Furthermore, they provide input to staff training and development, whether for international staff or in respect of equality and diversity initiatives.

As we have seen through all the examples discussed above, language centres are intimately involved in any number of tendrils of internationalisation activity across the university, in research, teaching and the cultural life of the institution, and beyond.

8 Supporting the development of institutional language policies (ILPs)

We cited above the LERU briefing note on member ILPs (Kortmann 2019). This report identifies three major goals of an ILP to promote the concept of the university as a multicultural and multilingual site that promotes internationalisation and mobility and supports all students:

- To support proficiency in academic English
- To encourage foreign language learning for students and for academic and administrative staff, and for family members
- To strengthen the professional use of regional languages

We would argue that ILPs should go further than this, supporting proficiency in national languages for international students in non-Anglophone universities, both for academic and personal purposes to enable them to integrate better both academically and socially. Universities also require policies around language proficiency for admissions purposes, and in some context for students to be eligible to graduate (e.g. where EU Mother Tongue + 2 languages has been adopted into education policies).

In our view, the learning of other languages (i.e. other than national languages and English) should be articulated clearly within an ILP as part of the global graduate skillset. This would support global mobility, be intrinsic to an international research strategy, and support the development of a university’s global

identity and culture as a key element of any international or internationalisation strategy. Indeed, the LERU report further elaborates on why language learning should be promoted for all, as:

- “necessary [...] not only for the immediate needs and purposes of the different groups involved in learning and teaching, research and administration
- personally enriching, highly interactive, downright enjoyable way of creating a true community among (national and international) students and employees across hierarchies, cultures and disciplines
- for the institution as a whole all this has the additional benefit of opening a new, substantial dimension of creating or solidifying a true corporate identity”. (2019: 34).

These points resonate strongly with many of the themes we have explored earlier, including that of the university’s global culture, here elaborated as a new, substantial dimension to the corporate identity. More importantly, the report states that language learning is *necessary*, rather than positing it as a desirable extra.

Language centres may wish to operate within the context of their university policies, and bemoan the lack of an ILP of any kind, or the lack of mention of languages within internationalisation strategies. However, we believe that language centres can and should attempt to bring the need for an ILP to the attention of their university’s senior leadership team, articulating the dimensions outlined above, and demonstrating how the centre already contributes to their achievement.

9 Conclusions

As we have demonstrated above, we have the evidence to show the contribution of language centres to our respective universities’ internationalisation strategies, and yet this is often not recognised or taken into account. Senior language centre staff need to feel confident in approaching relevant members of their senior leadership teams, not only questioning the absence of language policies, but also proposing their services to draft them. They should be proactive, and not wait to be invited to contribute to these debates. They should ideally identify ways of being in the room when internationalisation is being discussed, reminding their colleagues of the intercultural and linguistic dimensions which are intrinsically at the heart of being a global university.

The Association of University Language Communities in the UK & Ireland (AULC) published a proposed manifesto for UK universities in February 2020 at the end of a briefing paper on internationalisation in UK universities (Critchley et al. 2020), to

support its members in tackling these challenges and embracing these opportunities. This manifesto is reproduced here as an appendix. Perhaps the next step is a CercleS manifesto for language centres across European universities along the following lines:

1. A leadership role for language centres in internationalisation activities and the development in institutional language policies.
2. Language centres actively work in international collaborations and networks.
3. Language centres promote international and intercultural diversity.
4. Language centres embed and nurture a university's multilingual and multicultural environment.
5. Language centres develop students into global graduates, supporting global citizenship, employability and mobility.
6. Language centres can support all universities to develop Institutional Language Policies that extend beyond the corporate identity of the institution.

Appendix

AULC manifesto for UK universities

1. A global university celebrates the international and intercultural diversity of all its staff and students in an environment that fosters mutual trust and respect.
2. Language centres will foster a multilingual and multicultural culture across the University to support this.
3. A global university will be committed to developing its students into global graduates; its education and international mobility strategies will reflect this commitment. Language centres support the development of language and intercultural skills amongst students for global citizenship, employability and mobility; and will actively support international mobility and engagement.
4. A global university's research strategy will reflect the need for language and intercultural skills to allow the global university to be a responsible international partner, collaborating as equals in the co-creation of shared understandings, shared approaches and shared solutions to global challenges. Language centres will enable the development of these skills in academics and postgraduate researchers.
5. Language centres support the development of language and intercultural skills amongst university lecturers, so that the global university can adopt a curriculum and a mode of academic discourse that is international and diverse in its content and outlook.

6. A global university in the UK will adopt an effective institutional language policy that prioritises English, but recognises the importance of multilingual communication and multicultural experiences, and fosters the development of second language and inter-cultural competence amongst all staff and students.

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