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CercleS Policy Paper on Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Executive Summary

This Policy Paper on Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education presents the findings from a survey of language centres across the CercleS network, with an analysis of the impact of changes resulting from the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the opportunities arising from different modes of programme delivery, opportunities for increased international cooperation, and recommendations for the strategic role of language centres within University internationalisation strategies. The paper presents implications for consideration by University senior management teams to support such opportunities for language centres, especially as related to technical requirements, human resources and finance.

Background

CercleS Survey: “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Language Teaching in Higher Education”

This Policy Paper results from the CercleS Survey “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Language Teaching in Higher Education”, conducted between 30 March and 6 May 2021. The goal of the research was to identify the conditions and modes of delivery of language teaching and learning in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic, to define quality criteria of the different modes of language teaching and learning, and to inform future planning of CercleS training and development activities. A working group analysed the results from two separate questionnaires – addressing teaching and management staff respectively – and shared the outcomes with the CercleS community at a webinar at the end of June 2021. The results were also shared at international conferences in October and November 2021. Workshops were held on the didactical implications for future language teaching in Higher Education (October 2021) and on a Policy Statement based on the survey outcomes (November). This paper takes into account the results of these workshops. The final version was presented at the CercleS Conference in Porto in September 2022.

Trends in Higher Education

Language centres in Higher Education are influenced by the developments and challenges of university teaching, which respond to national and international trends and changes in the higher education landscape - and also inevitably by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, the goals and organisation of **university teaching** were becoming **more open and diverse**, as reflected in the European University Association (EUA) vision document "[Universities without walls](#)" (February 2021).

In a further [document published on 18 January 2022](#), the EU Commission promotes **integration, permeability and inter-institutional networking** in the European Higher Education Area; through which **new higher education alliances are setting up joint "virtual campuses"**, sharing their online learning resources, and enabling new (virtual) forms of mobility.

Changes in student mobility and trends such as the development of inter-university "virtual campuses" have an impact on the provisions to be offered by language centres in Higher Education. A university language centre contributes to the context of an "open university" when it comes to the inclusion of different (international) student groups, such as those with a refugee background. Furthermore, the pandemic has shown in particular that language teaching, through its focus on social interaction, makes an important contribution to socialisation and to student "well-being" in the university context.

Selected research on modes of delivery

Research in higher education teaching and learning

Research in and about higher education suggests that, in principle, modes of delivery with blended learning are more effective than purely face-to-face or purely online teaching since they combine the advantages of both physical and virtual spaces, as well as synchronous and asynchronous settings.

Otherwise, the effectiveness of blended and online teaching varies depending on the performance of the lecturers, the competences of the learners (e.g. the ability to organise themselves), and the course level. Whichever the case, the mode of delivery has an impact on students' well-being and their sense of social belonging to the learning group and the university (Petchey, Schmid, Niebert, Petko 2021).

Language education research comes to a similar conclusion when examining the interaction between members of the learning community and the **role design** and **rapport building** relevant to both face-to-face and online settings. (Senior 2010).

Different modes of delivery of language teaching: Personnel management implications

Definition of modes of delivery

The choice of appropriate modes of delivery of language teaching and learning in higher education has, of course, to be aligned to pedagogical thinking. In the CercleS survey, respondents were asked to comment on modes of delivery of language classes. Acknowledging the different terminology used across the CercleS network, we adopted the following definition:

- Face to Face (F2F) classes: in person lessons taking place in a classroom
- Web-enhanced classes: F2F lessons, integrated with the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (e.g. Moodle)
- Online remote classes: synchronous online lessons with the use of a videoconference system (e.g. Zoom)
- Blended learning: >50% of the course delivered online and the rest F2F
- Hybrid asynchronous: F2F lessons AND autonomous self-study activities for students
- Hybrid synchronous: F2F lessons AND online teaching.

Pedagogical reasons are important, and it is up to language centre management to make these choices in the best interests of their students. Nevertheless, wider managerial implications also have to be considered.

Personnel management implications regarding different modes of delivery

On the other hand, for any mode of delivery, suitable **technical equipment and support** present a key element contributing to state of the art teaching and learning in Higher Education in languages as much as any other discipline. University management is generally called upon to provide appropriate equipment and technical support.

The current formula of **workload of teachers** being based on contact hours with students needs to be revisited and adapted for online, blended, and hybrid teaching settings. Each of these modes of delivery are more time-consuming since they imply a lot of adaptation of digital environments to specific teaching experience and needs, the search and preparation of appropriate teaching materials, the production of self-study materials for the flipped classroom approach, and the extra feedback required to students on their work. None of these modes embracing online teaching elements contribute to a reduction in teaching costs; on the contrary. University management and human resource departments are therefore invited to develop new teaching contracts reflecting the additional workload based on the number of individual students involved, be it in face-to-face, online, or blended modes of delivery.

In this context, **job security** is also important. While it is, in some cases, convenient and reasonable to assign non-permanent teaching staff for online language courses, a stable team of permanent staff is key to maintain teaching standards, contributing to organisational benchmarking and supporting the students' experience of belonging to a given university. So, creating good working conditions and guarantees for permanent staff, who will not have to compete with more flexible and less expensive third-party teachers, is crucial. However, when utilised, freelance teachers should also be employed on a transparent and fair basis.

University management is invited to support language centre management in developing adequate and effective working contracts with third party teaching staff, aligned to current university and European standards, while offering the necessary amount of flexibility.

University language teachers need appropriate **technical, pedagogic and social skills** to cope with the partially new modes of delivery. As a result, language centre management require the resources to provide adequate training tools and seminars which accommodate their teachers' specific needs as designers of language learning environments.

As a result, in order to organise sustainable and high-quality language teaching in their centres on behalf of different university units and programmes, the language centre management also has to have appropriate **financial resources**. University management is therefore called upon to financially support the language centre management's efforts in the recruitment and development of their teaching staff in these different fields.

Language teaching staff will then also benefit from the University management's efforts to create a **healthy and safe working environment** and to promote mental health through organisational structure and culture, and the provision of seminars and consultations in related fields.

International cooperation

New opportunities for students and staff

In the ongoing process of globalisation, universities are finding themselves in a constant process to define strategies to address societal changes. Independently from these different rationales, the coronavirus crisis has required us to re-evaluate internationalisation as a key issue and extend the structures and measures of internationalisation built up in recent decades.

By definition, University language centres play a central role in this process and their accumulated experience during the pandemic has allowed them to participate in and to contribute to the development of new formats of **virtual collaboration** in the European Education and Research Area.

Based on the further development of already existing formats in language teaching & learning (such as tandem exchange), and the creation of new formats, academic target groups such as students and staff can now be offered a wider range of possibilities to define and enhance their individual academic profile through their international experiences.

The possibilities of personal academic development created during the pandemic could further contribute to a **new quality of international academic relations**. By implementing formats such as:

- Joint online modules, including virtual classrooms
- Opening already existing language courses to students of other institutions to extend language choices
- International student tandems
- Telecollaboration
- Joint/blended intercultural competence classes
- Guest lectures
- Tutored workshops
- International language meetups (cafés).

Language centres increasingly foster all forms of internationalisation; both abroad and at-home.

Strategic role of language centres

University management is therefore encouraged to use the expertise and resources language centres can offer. In allowing for the management implications discussed earlier in this document in an established legal, financial and didactical framework that guarantees and fosters quality the integration of language centres in local strategic developments will add greatly to the internationalisation efforts at each Institution. This includes reflection on workload, teaching hours, and technical resources, as well as teacher training and development (e.g. virtual job shadowing of teaching, virtual staff training, training and development between language centres, institutional partnerships). In the area of teacher development, CercleS will offer support through specific teacher training programmes, and the development of webinars and workshops, all open for recognition by national teacher training programmes.

By using the pandemic as a starting point to revisit international university profiles, and to integrate new forms of collaboration, universities will be able to enlarge and give focus to their specific profiles by providing or ensuring a meaningful international experience to the benefit of all students.

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