

## A PLEA FOR RETHINKING INSTITUTIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY DOCUMENTS

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**ABSTRACT. *A Plea for Rethinking Institutional Language Policy Documents.***

The present study aims to raise awareness on and to provide a synopsis of the role, function and relevance of language policy documents in HE, by bringing together some of the more recent conclusions of strategic papers or guidelines issued by representative bodies responsible for the standardization of language teaching and testing. The current definitions of and views on language policies invite reflections on the margins of the internationalisation of HE, the digitalisation of education and its tools, the role of the language instructors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, last but not least, the existence of institutional strategic documents. A local case (the language policy at Babeş-Bolyai University) is discussed against the backdrop of international frameworks for language instruction and in comparison with similar (national) language policies.

**Keywords:** *language policy, standardisation, language instruction, internationalisation of HE, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.*

**REZUMAT. *O pledoarie pentru regândirea documentelor de politică lingvistică la nivel instituțional.***

Studiul de față își propune să atragă atenția asupra rolului, funcției și relevanței documentelor de politică lingvistică din învățământul superior prin scurta trecere în revistă a unor concluzii ce rezultă din câteva ghiduri sau cadre normative elaborate recent de către instituții a căror misiune asumată este standardizarea predării și învățării limbilor. Definițiile și perspectivele actuale asupra politicilor lingvistice discută și aspecte legate de internaționalizarea învățământului superior, digitalizarea educației și a instrumentelor aferente, rolul instructorilor de limbă în secolul

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al XXI-lea, precum și existența unor documente strategice la nivel instituțional. Acest articol introductiv mai include și un studiu de caz local (documentul de politică lingvistică elaborat de Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai) revăzut din perspectiva unor modele-cadru privind instruirea lingvistică existente la nivel național sau internațional.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *politică lingvistică, standardizare, instruire lingvistică, internaționalizarea învățământului superior, abilități pentru secolul al XXI-lea.*

Despite the massive acknowledgement and awareness of the increasing role played by communication in everyday life as well as in the socio-professional sphere of foreign language learners/users, the debates around the possibilities of extending curricular standards beyond the local/institutional level are far from closing; they are rarely the subject of coherent educational research and development. In fact, the financial and decisional autonomy granted to Romanian state-budgeted universities gives the academic bodies the freedom to design and revise their curricula according to the strategic priorities of the universities in question, to their financial possibilities or constraints and, last but not least, to the needs and demands of their stakeholders. The calibration of local standards against the international quality assurance ones has been a concern for foreign language teachers in HE especially since the adoption and implementation of essential tools and frameworks such as the Language Portfolio and the CEFR. With regard to language curricula for LAP and LSP Romanian students, the responsibility for identifying, formulating and measuring learning objectives and outcomes is attributed to the specific language departments/faculty which function side-by-side or inside subject-expert departments.

There is vague, if not downright little, agreement on the role and structure of institutional language policy documents. While the 2018 version of the CEFR, for example, identifies the language learner/user first and foremost as a “social agent’, acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process” (CEFR 2018<sup>2</sup>), the actual ways in which this engagement in the social aspect of the decision-making process is outlined are not formulated as such at the level of regional/local/national language policy. The CEFR itself asserts its function of *assisting* rather than *imposing* strict criteria for curricular planning and assessment:

One thing should be made clear right away. We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it. We are raising questions, not

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<sup>2</sup> The new CEFR 2018 version is available at: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>

answering them. It is not the function of the Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ. (CEFR: Notes to the User 2018)

If authors like Anthony Liddicoat bemoan the absence of clear recommendations regarding specific methodology for language learning/teaching ("Language teaching method has always been a key concern of language educators, but has tended not to receive a great deal of attention in language planning and policy"- Liddicoat 2004, 154), we believe a good starting point in finding a concord on the debates around the effectiveness of adopting a language policy document would be the very formulation of a definition for it. If we are to accept that language policy can be understood as "the deliberate choices made by governments or other authorities with regard to the relationship between language and social life" (Djité in Liddicoat 2004, 154), the next logical step would be the nominalisation of the stakeholders involved in the negotiation process of drafting and adopting such documents. The recent *Wulkow Memorandum on the Identity and Profile of Language Teachers in Language Centres on Higher Education Institutions* (adopted in 2019)<sup>3</sup> states that these stakeholders are: the employer, the students, the language centres, and the business sector. The *Memorandum* acknowledges internationalization as one of the main triggers of *change* in tertiary or adult language education, alongside the proliferation of a digitally-oriented society and that of the social media:

Indeed, the internationalization of European universities has brought new target groups, who sometimes present didactic and intercultural challenges at a time when the definition of teacher roles and expectations regarding methodologies clash. (...) Both the increasing integration of technology and social media into pedagogy, and the need for creative approaches to develop flexible modes of delivery increase pressure on teachers to respond effectively to the needs of students and future employers. This will in turn have an impact on the resources, which parent institutions must provide to help ensure the quality of content delivery while increasing student satisfaction as well as success. (*Wulkow Memorandum* 2019, 2-3)

Indeed, the shifts of the fast-changing educational landscape make it even more difficult for the responsible bodies to pinpoint homogeneous criteria for a language policy that could function well beyond the local area. A

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<sup>3</sup> The *Wulkow Memorandum* is available on the CercleS official webpage at: <http://www.cercles.org/EN-H30/news/209/wulkow-memorandum-is-ready.html>

simple exercise in self-assessment of language experts' essential 2020+ skill-sets, as formulated in the *Memorandum (professional expertise, openness to change, digital competence, managerial competence, team skills – see Wulkow Memorandum 2019, 4-5)*, invites one for further reflection on the complex profile of a language instructor for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Consistent with the view of HE as the space of intercultural and multilingual communication and exchange, a more comprehensive definition of language policy is required and one which reflects the current challenges of both learning and teaching in an international university. The *CercleS Guidelines for Defining a Language Policy for Institutions in Higher Education*<sup>4</sup> advance the understanding of language policies “in context”; this might allow for generous wiggle room for both the local and the supra-regional decisional bodies to work out a coherent plan for agreeing on a core-language policy:

A language policy document is an important strategic instrument in the general context of internationalisation, growing competition and other future challenges in Higher Education. (*Guidelines 2015, 1*)

The *Guidelines* offer those interested in drafting a language policy document a possible structure which can be adapted according to specific needs or limitations and aligned with international standards of quality assurance:

The structure of the document could be as follows:

- a. Introduction/Vision statement
- b. Context and conditions
- c. Languages of tuition and ICLHE (Integration of Content and Language in Higher Education)
- d. Languages taught and language acquisition
- e. Use of languages in research
- f. Use of languages in Public Relations
- g. Use of languages in everyday life on campus
- h. Implementation strategies (*Guidelines 2015, 2*)

Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU) is, in this respect, an interesting case-study for examining the content of a language policy document and for illustrating the role of language departments and language centres in the decision-making process behind regulating language learning and teaching at an institutional level. Both the Language Policy Official Document (2014<sup>5</sup>) and

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<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://www.aks-sprachen.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Guidelines-for-a-Language-Policy-Model-CercleS.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Language Policy Document of Babeş-Bolyai University is available only in Romanian at: <https://senat.ubbcluj.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Politica-lingvistica-UBB.pdf>

the Methodological Appendix to the Language Policy Document (2018<sup>6</sup>) are considered strategic documents for our university and they have been the subject of gradual negotiation between the members of language departments responsible for both the teaching and assessment of (non-)philologist students, the members of the language centres at BBU, the representative body of students at BBU and the BBU Board, namely the stakeholders. What resulted from the revisions of these documents are prescriptive guidelines for language teaching and testing, mainly for non-philologist students.

What is noteworthy about the Language Policy Document at BBU is that it clearly states the multicultural profile of the University, where the official languages of instruction are Romanian, German and Hungarian; several Faculties have decided to internationalise their academic specialisations by choosing English or French as languages of learning and teaching. Moreover, it discusses the crucial role that Romanian as a Foreign Language has played in authentically internationalising BBU. The Methodological Appendix offers viable solutions for less proficient language users enrolled in LAP and LSP classes through the “learning gap route”, where remedial courses are supposed to help bridge the gap between A1-A2 and B1 users. Furthermore, in theory, the Appendix allows students to opt for the “supplementary language route” either through self-study or through CLIL courses (still to be negotiated with the Faculty).

However, there are several aspects where the Language Policy Document might be considerably improved. The Methodological Appendix (despite its name) does not suggest anything about the methods of teaching or learning; rather, it focuses primarily on teaching and testing *procedures*, not methods. Additionally, even though there are clear target levels for BA students (at least B1) and for MA students (at least B2), each Faculty is given the freedom to decide on ways of implementing the remedial or supplementary routes. This leaves the language departments little authority in homogenising teaching and testing procedures and in coherently devising a strategic plan for future development and/or improvement of the Language Policy. There is no mention of language requirements in relation to conducting research in the academia or in relation to the administrative body.

In search of better examples of good practices in the field, it might be of interest to language experts to revisit the 2005 *ESP National Curriculum of Ukraine*<sup>7</sup>, a global project which was the result of fruitful collaboration

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<sup>6</sup> The Methodological Appendix is available only in Romanian at: [https://senat.ubbcluj.ro/wp-content/uploads/Anexa-Metodologie\\_final-1.pdf](https://senat.ubbcluj.ro/wp-content/uploads/Anexa-Metodologie_final-1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Free consultation and downloading available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277030181\\_English\\_for\\_Specific\\_Purposes\\_ESP\\_National\\_Curriculum\\_for\\_Universities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277030181_English_for_Specific_Purposes_ESP_National_Curriculum_for_Universities)

between the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine and the British Council. It is, to this day, one of the few and best initiatives advocating for the standardisation of the study of ESP in HE. A more organic transition of national curricular design from secondary to tertiary education, clear focus on quality assurance strategies in language education, fostering collaborative work, a more nuanced correlation with the demands of the labor market, as well as a willingness to acquire cross-sector skills (on the part of students and teachers alike) are just a few of the areas that should be looked into before rethinking strategic documents such as the language policy.

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