

# Language Policy at German Universities

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(Translation: Laura Montgomery,  
The Brenn-White Group)

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The Voice of the Universities

Ahrstraße 39    Tel.: 0228/887-0    post@hrk.de  
D-53175 Bonn    Fax: 0228/887-110    www.hrk.de  
Germany

## Summary

Scholarship is by its very nature international. This internationality inevitably goes hand in hand with multiculturalism as well as with multilingualism. Against this background, the growing use of English as a lingua franca in academic contexts has for some time been the subject of intensive discussion in Germany and elsewhere. Questions have been raised regarding, inter alia, the future of German as a language of science and scholarship.

Universities have responded to the challenge of internationalisation by intensifying the use of the English in teaching and research. This use of English has created favourable conditions for leading researchers from outside the German-speaking world to engage in research activity in Germany. Similarly, it has been possible to enhance the appeal of individual degree programmes for international students.

As a result of this development, new problems have arisen for universities:

- The increasingly common mandatory use of English in research can impede the work of researchers, causing them to work less effectively and efficiently. At the same time, insufficient consideration of non-English-language publications results in undesirable competitive distortion.
- Evidence from the field of teaching and learning has shown that not all international students meet the expected language prerequisites for studying on degree programmes taught in English. Furthermore, not all teachers necessarily possess the language skills required to guarantee excellent teaching delivered in English.
- Universities are often ill-equipped in terms of staff and administrative support to meet the demands that have arisen as a result of internationalisation.
- The conscious shift towards the exclusive use of English in research, teaching, and learning occurs at the expense of other languages and thus threatens linguistic diversity. This contradicts the efforts of German foreign cultural and educational policy to raise the status of the German language worldwide as well as the endeavours of the European Union in promoting multilingualism in Europe.
- Last but not least, an important aspect of international exchanges is that students and researchers from abroad get to know the culture and language of their host country.

In light of these circumstances, it is essential to anchor multilingualism firmly in academic discourse, both at a national and an international level. The aim is to raise awareness of language policy issues and thus

promote the conscious use of different languages in everyday life at the university. Genuine multilingualism can only be achieved in the long term if there is a sensible balance between the national language, i.e. German, and the “international” language of English, as well as any further languages.

With this in mind, the recommendations presented below, while written from a German perspective, are intended to serve as a contribution to multilingualism in Europe.

### Recommendations

- To promote multilingualism and to ensure that German remains a language of science and scholarship, there needs to be a reflective approach to decisions pertinent to language policy. In particular, **stakeholders at all levels** need to identify and act upon areas where there is scope for action, bearing in mind the goal of multilingualism in higher education. In this respect, language is but one dimension of the international culture of a university. Cultural diversity in universities demands above all the willingness to change, beginning with legislators and ministerial executive authorities through to matters concerning the universities’ own self-governing processes.
- **Researchers** and **students** at German universities are urged to acquire, in addition to German, at least a working knowledge of a widely used foreign language – as a rule, English – to enable them to communicate internationally. The acquisition of further foreign languages may be essential for some disciplines, and is desirable in the spirit of multilingualism. By the same token, it is expected that international students and researchers will be willing to acquire an adequate knowledge of German.
- **Universities** as institutions need to formulate an institution-specific language policy that contributes to the preservation of German as a language of academic discourse and at the same time actively promotes the acquisition and use of other languages. In order to achieve these twin objectives, universities must be enabled to offer appropriate language training and support. When the acquisition of language skills is necessary, this should be integrated as a mandatory element into the respective programmes of study. A university’s institutional language policy should take into account its geographical location and regional environment alongside its mission statement and profile.
- **Policy makers** are urged to create conditions that will make it possible to achieve the given objectives. They must make the necessary resources available and provide universities with the adequate human resources and sufficient funding for language research and language centres, as well as for services to support

researchers (e. g. translators, proofreaders, interpreters). Furthermore, the funding of European bibliometric instruments for non-English-language publications is essential in order to ensure that publications in languages other than English receive appropriate attention.

## 1. Introduction

German universities strongly advocate a globally minded policy, as well as the process of internationalisation resulting from this. The success and impact of related reforms are, of course, regularly monitored, and measures to internationalise continuously adapted and improved. This also involves addressing the issue of language policy, whose significance is growing as internationalisation advances. For some time, the increasing use of English as lingua franca in academic contexts has been the subject of intensive discussion in Germany, and questions have been raised regarding the future of German as a language of science and scholarship.

The European convergence process, with its specific objectives and wide range of implications for universities, is itself a feature of the globalisation process. The Bologna Declaration of European Ministers responsible for higher education makes specific reference to the issue of language, stating that the goal of creating a European Higher Education Area should take "full respect of the diversity of (...) languages"<sup>1</sup>. The European Council and EU Commission explicitly advocate multilingualism in Europe and call for, inter alia, endeavours "to provide young people (...) continuing beyond general education into vocational and higher education, with a diverse and high-quality supply of language and culture education options enabling them to master at least two foreign languages, which is a factor of integration in a knowledge-based society"<sup>2</sup>. The academic multilingualism of Europe, which features a number of established languages of science and scholarship, provides the region with a competitive advantage that should be cherished and preserved. The recommendations presented here are written from a German perspective. Nevertheless, their aim is to make a contribution to multilingualism in Europe.

German science organisations have addressed the role of German as a language of science and scholarship in various declarations and memoranda.<sup>3</sup> The resulting considerations form the basis for further debate on this issue.

## 2. The Specific Challenge Facing Universities

In developing a global conception of the university as an institution, one needs to address the question of how to deal with the use of different

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<sup>1</sup> "The European Higher Education Area. Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education", 19<sup>th</sup> June 1999, Bologna.

<sup>2</sup> "Multilingualism: An Asset for Europe and a Shared Priority" 18.9.2008, COM (2008) 566 final; "Report on the Implementation of Council Resolution of 21<sup>st</sup> November 2008 on a European Strategy for Multilingualism" (2008/C 320/01).

<sup>3</sup> Joint Declaration by the Presidents of AvH, DAAD, Goethe-Institut and HRK (18.2.2009) "German as a Language of Science and Research", AvH: "Sprachenpolitische Leitlinien der AvH" (June 2009), GATE Germany: "National Code of Conduct on Foreign Students at German Universities" (Resolution of the General Meeting of the HRK, November 2009), DAAD: "Memorandum on Promoting German as an Academic Language" (February 2010).

languages within academia – the national language and English in particular, but other foreign languages as well. Universities are thus faced with a conflict of interests. On the one hand, excellent teaching and research need to be anchored firmly in an international context. On the other hand, it is important to make the most of the opportunities inherent in the established and fully developed national academic language and to ensure that research findings are made accessible to domestic society. Universities need to find institutional solutions to this double challenge.

Various groups of people in universities are affected in different ways, depending on their specific role.<sup>4</sup>

- Teaching faculty at German universities  
The large number of courses offered in English at German universities demonstrates that university teaching has responded to the demands of internationalisation. However, not all lecturers necessarily possess the language skills required to guarantee excellent teaching in English. Conversely, lecturers from abroad who have or acquire German language abilities find it easier to integrate into German society and university life. Furthermore, communication with local university staff and administrators generally requires solid skills in the national language.
- International researchers  
Nowadays it is possible to conduct research in English in many areas within the university. This is an important prerequisite for attracting leading non-German-speaking researchers to engage in research activity in Germany. However, the increasing use of the English language leads to a situation in which international researchers do not communicate in German, even if they are able to do so. This means that important resources and potential – for example, opportunities for long-term employment in Germany – remain untapped. Conversely, for international researchers, German language skills (or their acquisition) ease integration into German university life and into society and, furthermore, are generally necessary to actively partake in academic self-management.
- International students and doctoral candidates  
International students and doctoral candidates are warmly welcomed at German universities. An international student population enriches university life and contributes to a stimulating and international learning environment for all students. Together with their German colleagues, international doctoral candidates are instrumental in the further development of research and the advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, in view of current

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<sup>4</sup> The following discussion focuses on aspects relevant to language policy. A discussion of intercultural requirements, while also relevant, lies beyond the scope of this text and must therefore be addressed elsewhere.

demographic trends, it is vitally important for the German economy to train a sufficient number of qualified specialists. In addition, international graduates are Germany's future partners and advocates in research, business, and culture.

With the help of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes delivered in English, universities have enhanced their international profile and attract students and young researchers from around the world. The admission of students and young researchers with little or no German language skills ushers in new opportunities, but is also accompanied by new challenges. If teachers or students do not have the necessary English-language skills or if they lack opportunities to communicate in the local language, they will fail to integrate properly into the academic and social life of the university and its environment, thus defeating the purpose of having courses taught in English. Furthermore, among international students and their peer groups there is the expectation – often unspoken – that study in Germany should also help them to develop their German language skills and deepen their contact with German society, which in turn should open up long-term employment prospects in Germany. Opportunities for international employees in the German job market are significantly enhanced through knowledge of German and English (or other foreign languages).

- German students and doctoral candidates  
The ability to speak foreign languages – when simultaneously reinforcing competence in the mother tongue – provides students with desirable skills and a competitive advantage for later professional life in an international working environment. This in itself demonstrates the added value of courses offered in foreign languages. However, for students with insufficient foreign language skills, this positive effect can also be thrown into reverse. This concerns not only students completing selected course work in English, but also those who are part of doctoral schools and colleges where only English is used. Here, too, non-native speakers can be adversely affected if communication takes place exclusively in English. Furthermore, a growing number of students and doctoral candidates at German universities aspire to study abroad without always possessing the required language skills (i. e. at least a working knowledge of the host country's language and the respective language of instruction). This jeopardises their chances of success in their studies or research.

### **3. Situational Analysis of the Respective Fields of Action and Resulting Recommendations**

#### **3.1 Research**

In the field of research, efforts to maximise efficiency in communication processes are leading increasingly to the exclusive use of English, not only in the international but also the national setting, from research

proposals and reports through to subject-specific events. This is particularly the case for publications, since the existing bibliometric databases are orientated towards English-language titles, while publications in other languages are given, at most, negligible consideration. The consequent mandatory use of a foreign language can restrict the effectiveness and efficiency of researchers in their work. Furthermore, it is not suitable for the dissemination of research findings of national or societal relevance, and can impede long-term access to older, non-English-language documentation of individual academic disciplines. In addition, insufficient consideration of non-English-language publications leads to undesirable competitive distortion.

- **Proposals and Reporting**

Situation: There is an expectation not only at the European level but also increasingly in Germany that proposals and reports should be written in English.

Recommendation: An excessive dominance of English can hinder innovation. Proposals, assessments, and reports should therefore not only take into account the respective traditions of the academic disciplines and their local and regional contexts, but also permit the greatest possible choice of language. As a rule, it should therefore be possible to write proposals – including those at the EU level – (also) in German or another common language of academic discourse. It will thus be necessary to ensure that only reviewers with the necessary linguistic proficiency are appointed. In the case of the EU, it is already possible for interim reports to be submitted in various languages. Researchers should be more strongly encouraged to make use of this opportunity.

- **Publications**

Situation: Today, it is common in many areas of research to publish in English. The existing bibliographic databases and citation indexes are geared towards English-language titles and give only inadequate consideration to publications in other languages.

Recommendation: It is necessary to continue utilising the potential of existing scientific languages, such as German, as publication languages, and to strengthen their profile as languages of scholarship. This may, for example, involve running parallel German and English publications.<sup>5</sup> In the case of non-English-speaking authors, translation should be funded or proofreading services offered.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, at the European level, an alternative should be established to the current bibliometric instruments in order to

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<sup>5</sup> A successful example of this practice is the journal *Angewandte Chemie*. Furthermore, various academic associations such as the Verein für Socialpolitik (Social Policy Association) or the Deutsche Statistische Gesellschaft (German Statistical Society) offer members' magazines in both German and English. These, too, could provide role models for other academic associations.

<sup>6</sup> In this context, the VW Foundation initiative to fund the translation of German language academic papers deserves mention as a positive example.



give greater consideration to non-English-language publications. Here, it is necessary to examine whether there could be meaningful cooperation with research regions outside Europe, for example with countries in Asia. A European alternative to the Anglo-Saxon tools for measuring research output by means of citation frequency should also be developed. Both performance-related resource allocation and academic appointments should take into account the distortions arising from the current situation. Finally, when it comes to forming recommendations for international publishing practices in the context of evaluation processes, it is important to bear in mind the implications for language policy.

- Subject-specific Events  
Situation: In some disciplines, the preparation and organisation of events taking place in Germany with a largely or exclusively German-speaking audience are increasingly conducted in English.  
Recommendation: Universities should develop a greater sensitivity to language issues when preparing and conducting events. Ideally, events taking place in Germany with a German-speaking audience should be held in German, although any discipline-specific differences in norms need to be taken into account. International events should be held with the support of simultaneous interpreters, or should be based on the principle of receptive multilingualism, whereby participants speak their own language, but should also be able to sufficiently understand the language of the other participants. Academic associations should be urged to adopt a similar approach.
- Doctoral phase  
Situation: In Germany, a growing number of English-language doctoral programmes are being offered in order to drive the process of internationalisation and attract young researchers from abroad. However, if participating German doctoral candidates and the German teaching faculty possess insufficient English language skills, these programmes can generate barriers to comprehension and communication. Conversely, inadequate English-language skills on the part of international participants can also hinder effective academic integration. Furthermore, there is the danger of frustration on the part of international participants if, despite the time spent in Germany, they have not been able to acquire any German language skills, thus precluding contact to local people.  
Recommendation: Participants in doctoral and graduate schools should, whenever necessary, have the opportunity to acquire adequate German- or foreign-language skills with the help of preparatory and support courses, and they should be actively encouraged to take up these offers. In order to reduce communication barriers, greater emphasis should be placed on the principle of receptive multilingualism. However, it should be acknowledged that doctoral candidates are generally under

significant time pressure. Therefore, language standards must be clearly communicated during the doctoral admissions process.

### 3.2 Teaching and Learning

German universities have successfully developed the international orientation and enhanced the attractiveness of the courses they offer. In this respect, individual courses and even entire degree programmes offered in English have clearly played an important role. However, it is clear that not all lecturers possess the language skills required to ensure excellent teaching in English.

As more and more English-taught courses are introduced, it becomes clear that new challenges emerge due to the extra demands placed on students and lecturers. These challenges arise not only in terms of language and culture, but also regarding intramural traditions. Moreover, it has become evident that the expansion of English-language programmes of study is taking place against a background of restricted financial and human resources, often at the expense of courses in other languages.

- Study-related Information and Guidance Services  
Situation: German universities are working to ensure that information services are increasingly accessible to prospective students and researchers from other countries. At the same time, for reasons of capacity, a considerable amount of essential information, documentation, and forms is available in German only, and the same is true of student guidance and other services. Consequently, much of this information remains inaccessible to an international audience. International students and researchers thus find that integrating into the day-to-day reality of German study and research is rendered unnecessarily difficult.  
Recommendation: Beyond the general German language content, universities need to work consistently on improving their foreign language presence on the internet, offering guidance and service in English and – depending on the discipline and international interest – in other languages. In addition, frequently used forms and other essential documents should be translated into English and other major foreign languages.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is recommended that universities create an overview of the language resources available within the university in order to be able to utilise these should the need arise.
- Language Expectations  
Situation: It is often the case that ERASMUS students and students on English-language programmes possess minimal German-language skills. The providers of English-language programmes sometimes emphasise for marketing reasons that knowledge of

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<sup>7</sup> Here it should be pointed out which language version of examination regulations and other official acts ultimately constitutes the binding version.

German is not necessary for study in Germany. In practice, this results in problems and frustration for those involved. A lack of adequate German skills significantly hinders academic and personal integration into German university life. Furthermore, there is an expectation – often unspoken – on the part of international students and their peer groups that study in Germany should also lead to a reasonable level of German-language skill and contact with German society. Conversely, this also applies to students and doctoral candidates from German universities who wish to study abroad as part of their studies or research.

Recommendation: Universities must pay particular attention to the language qualifications of all their students. In the case of international students, German-language skills promote integration and academic success. Wherever students with no knowledge of German are admitted, they should be encouraged to acquire German-language skills during the course of their studies. The extent of German proficiency that students should develop must correspond to their academic goals. Universities should offer language courses and integrate them as mandatory components of the programmes of study. It may be necessary to develop and implement innovative learning scenarios appropriate to the various needs, expectations, time restrictions, and learning objectives.

Partnership agreements with universities abroad should also take language issues into consideration (for example, to ensure adequate preparation of the university's own students prior to studying abroad, and that language courses are provided for visiting students and researchers).

Students at German universities who aspire to study abroad as part of their studies need to possess knowledge of the language of the host country in order to ensure successful study and integration. The language competence should correspond to the targeted learning outcomes.

International teaching staff should also, after a reasonable period of time, acquire adequate German-language skills. To this end, these staff members should receive comprehensive support from the university.

- Courses

Situation: Over recent years, a large number of English-taught courses have been established at German universities in order to internationalise teaching and attract international students. In other degree programmes, too, English is playing an increasingly significant role. On the other hand, not all teachers possess the language skills required to guarantee delivery of excellent teaching in English. English-taught courses also present some students with comprehension and communication problems. This may impede

the quality of the academic culture of debate and also compromise understanding of the subject.

Recommendation: In the case of students on undergraduate programmes, it would seem sensible to first develop proficiency in German in order to enable students to confidently use the language in an academic context. An introductory course in English for academic purposes can be additionally offered as a supplement. Undergraduate courses should thus, as a rule, be held in German<sup>8</sup>, but, when necessary, can include literature in English and other foreign languages. At the same time, the acquisition of one or more foreign languages should be continuously supported because of the academic and professional benefits this affords. Completion of language courses – including German courses – should therefore be awarded with credit points. In the case of postgraduate study, a greater degree of variation with regard to the use of different languages would appear both possible and reasonable.

### 3.3 Institutional Dimension

An institution's international orientation is credible and effective only if it embraces the whole range of university activities. Alongside research and teaching, internal and external administrative and communication processes also need to be taken into account. Providing information, guidance, and support to faculty and students from abroad as well as dealing with various European and international mobility programmes requires not only familiarity with particular university, academic, and funding systems, but also proficiency in the relevant languages. These growing demands are, however, not reflected in university staff appointment schemes, which in many cases fail to include adequately remunerated positions.

Universities have, at least to some extent, orientated their public image towards an international audience. However, continuously assuring the quality of its foreign-language internet presence sometimes presents the university with a particular challenge. In addition, due to capacity restraints, essential information, documents, and forms as well as information and guidance may be available in German only. A significant amount of information thus remains inaccessible to an international audience. This makes it unnecessarily difficult for students and researchers to deal with integrating into the day-to-day reality of German study and research.

- Information and Public Image  
Situation: German universities are increasingly orientating their internet presence to an international audience, but a significant proportion of information remains available in German only. Ensuring quality in foreign languages also presents a challenge.

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<sup>8</sup> Consideration can, however, be given to other solutions, according to the specific academic discipline. These will require careful scrutiny.

Recommendation: General information about the university, online information, and other external communications should be available at least bilingually in German and English. Further linguistic variety should depend on the university's international priorities. Close attention must be paid to the quality of the foreign language information published.

- **Guidance, Service, and the Training of Administrative Staff**  
Situation: Against the background of an increasingly international student population and a culturally diverse teaching faculty, university employees face a range of new tasks. In order to support international researchers and students, provide information and guidance services, and deal with the various European and international funding programmes, administrative staff need not only to be familiar with particular university, academic, and funding systems, but also to be proficient in the relevant languages. These growing demands are, however, not reflected in university staff appointment schemes, which in many cases fail to include adequately remunerated positions.  
Recommendation: Only in exceptional cases can broad multilingualism be achieved amongst administrative staff. Nonetheless, it is necessary to ensure that staff who have contact with international students and researchers possess at least a working knowledge of English. Intensified efforts to attract international staff, as well as staff with migrant backgrounds, can help to ease the situation and establish a welcoming culture at the university. In addition, universities should examine whether it would be useful to consolidate all administration and services for international students in a central location. This would facilitate the creation of a team consisting of staff with the appropriate language skills.
- **Support for Academic Staff**  
Situation: In order for work carried out at a university to be internationally "visible", it is important that findings be published not only in German but also in English. However, not all members of the academic community possess the proficiency required for publishing in English.  
Recommendation: Universities must offer courses in academic English and, when the need arises, provide editorial assistance for English language texts.