

Survey of the Experience of the Implementation of the Stellenbosch University Language Policy and Plan (2006)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY September 2006

Aim of the study

To survey the experiences of third year undergraduate students, lecturers and C2 administrative personnel of the implementation of the Language Policy and Plan of Stellenbosch University (SU). The report also looked at the trends in comparison to those noted in the 2004 Survey, which was conducted after the first year of the implementation of the Language Policy.

Research design

The objectives of this survey were to describe the following:

1. the experience of lecturers of the implementation of the Language Policy in terms of their three core functions: research, teaching and community development (web-based questionnaire);
2. the experience of administrative personnel of the implementation of the policy (web-based questionnaire);
3. the experience of the implementation of the policy for students studying third year modules (paper-based questionnaire);
4. the experience of the general student body of the implementation of the policy (web-based questionnaire).

For the third year modules questionnaires were sent to students on 24 modules in nine faculties. Care was taken to avoid interfering with teaching and learning processes. The questionnaires used consisted of mainly closed questions¹. The research process was overseen by a research committee comprised of members of Academic Support and members of the Language Policy Revision Task Team. The questionnaires were evaluated by various experts in the field of language policy and research methodology, Stellenbosch University lecturers and independent consultants.

Research limitations include the fact that this is a perception survey; that the web surveys obtained responses via self-selection; that not enough E-option third year modules were included and that the questionnaires were handed out to third year students late in the first semester, when attendance rates could be lower than average.

The response rate for the surveys was: 1140 students (third year modules); 2120 students – 10.6% (web survey); 192 lecturers - 25.3%; and 262 administrative personnel – 20.7%. The student groups were weighted towards white and Afrikaans, with the web survey student group being additionally overrepresented in favour of students living in a residence. The lecturer group was slightly weighted towards younger and more junior lecturers. The administrative group was weighted towards females, younger and white personnel.

Discussion of findings

Attitudes

Analysis of the qualitative responses revealed that the issue of language and language policy at Stellenbosch University is for a number of students and staff a highly emotive issue. There were also students and staff who indicated being tired of the topic, and that according to especially staff, the stir this issue is causing inside and outside the university is doing the institution and their morale harm.

¹ Copies of the questionnaires are available on request from SOL@su.ac.za

There was a strong call from a large number of students to keep the University Afrikaans. There was also a strong call from the C2 administrative personnel to keep the University Afrikaans, but also from this group, a desire to move on to other issues and to be more tolerant. The extent of the call to keep the University Afrikaans was not reflected in the lecturers' sample. None of the issues that lecturers raised most often, featured frequently for the other three groups.

The findings reflected an awareness of the Language Policy and Plan at Stellenbosch University. The overall responses towards the policy varied. For students the aggregated response rate in favour of the policy was between 50% and 67%. Although administrative and lecturing personnel were not asked this direct question, their responses to a number of indicators showed that their response to the policy was noticeably more negative than students. The response of lecturers was also more negative than administrative personnel. (40% of lecturers disagreed that they chose to work at SU because it is an Afrikaans University and 62% disagreed that they chose to work at SU because of the Language Policy; 29% of administrative personnel disagreed that they chose to work at SU because it is an Afrikaans University and 41% disagreed that they chose to work at SU because of the Language Policy).

Findings suggested that each group's response to the Language Policy was influenced by the tasks of that group, as well as the exposure and proficiencies of that target group. Each group (personnel and students) responded negatively in the area where they would be most disadvantaged.

Students

Many of the student open comments displayed depth and insight into language issues and a desire to contribute towards positive resolution of the problems.

The generally positive aggregated response to the policy (between 50% and 67% for students) was far lower when disaggregated according to the variables of race and language.

With regard to students, both language and race featured as variables. Race featured as a variable in relation to the affective and politico-cultural issues, for example, feeling at home at the university or attitude towards the Language Policy per se. Language was a stronger variable in relation to language of instruction in academic settings. In this regard African students reported the most difficulty with language of instruction, and made most use of academic support facilities.

The findings suggest marginalization of black, non-Afrikaans speaking and especially African students.

Lecturers

Lecturers participating in the third year module survey indicated a willingness to respond to students' language related needs and 42% were able to cite examples of good practice in this regard.

Language proficiency

With regard to both students and staff, greater language proficiency was shown to reside in Afrikaans than in English for most respondents. However for lecturers, there is greater proficiency in reading in English than in Afrikaans. From the point of view of a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, in which one builds on the cultural capital of students, it would be desirable that as much teaching and learning as possible is conducted in the language in which students report the greatest proficiency. Despite the fact that there is greater proficiency in Afrikaans amongst students and staff, there is a small but noteworthy minority in both cases who possess little or no proficiency in this language. This leads to a fundamental dilemma: does one cater for the majority, which is to varying extents bilingual, or for the minority, which is to varying extents not

proficient in Afrikaans at all, and in some cases, experiencing non-language related challenges arising out of, for example, prior schooling?

A vast linguistic resource resides in the fact that there is a fair degree of bilingualism at the University, where some respondents report having both English and Afrikaans as home languages, and many do in fact teach or learn in both languages. There is also a sizeable group of students who report being willing to learn in and acquire English or Afrikaans as second or additional languages.

This report

The survey provides a number of indicators that could be used for evaluation and revision purposes. The difficulty with several of these indicators, however, is that unless they are benchmarked with indicators at other universities, it is difficult to pronounce whether they reveal a positive or negative situation. They are important, however, in revealing a number of the fault-lines and areas for future development and improvement.

The 2004 and 2006 reports

The variation of responses between 2004 and 2006 has been uneven. In some cases there is a slightly more positive response to the institution. For example, students reported a more positive response to choice of SU in 2006 (88.6% v. 84% in 2004). In other cases, especially for administrative personnel, there is a less positive response to several of the statements in 2006.

It was found that the response rate was lower in the current survey amongst administrative personnel and lecturers than in the 2004 survey. In the qualitative responses, frustration with the negative publicity that Stellenbosch University was receiving and its influence on morale was mentioned, which could account for the decreased response rate.

Concluding comments

The fact that so many of the sentiments expressed by students, lecturers and administrative personnel are linked to aspects of individuals' own biographies and their sectoral interests, allied to the degree of diversity and varying interests of the different sectors, points to the unlikelihood of being able to cater successfully for the interests, needs and ethical positions of all target groups served by Stellenbosch University. A Language Policy cannot serve all interests and all moral ethical standpoints. The way forward should be determined by a combination of teaching and learning considerations and direction as provided by the mission and vision of the institution within the context of the broader society the University intends to serve.

The variation of responses aggregated for lecturers, students and administrative personnel; the variation of responses amongst groups identified as 'majority' or 'minority' according to the biographic variables of language or race (especially when the two are combined); the complexity of contextual influences as hinted at in the in-depth discussion of specific modules; and the variety of concerns ranging from the pragmatic, ethical-ideological or identity related, implies that this kind of report cannot provide easy solutions or clear cut suggestions to the Task Team for the Revision of the Language Policy and Plan. The complexities and dilemmas raised point to deeper questions in relation to the vision and mission of the University, and to fundamental questions about the primary role and target audience of the University.

Implications for policy revision

The following issues arising out of the survey can be used in conjunction with other sources of information, in order to guide the policy revision process.

- **Identity and ethos of the University**

There is a variation of aggregated responses to the idea of the University being an "Afrikaans" university. The call for the University to remain Afrikaans was made, in descending order, by students, administrative personnel and lecturers. The call for the University to remain Afrikaans was often made very emotively, especially amongst the students. Any indication that the University will not remain "Afrikaans"

will involve much consternation amongst this group and the negative reaction, which would potentially assume a publicised and politicised form, would have to be taken into account if a new policy were to depart substantially from the old, and in favour of less Afrikaans.

There is a significant group of lecturers and administrative personnel who appear to call for a linguistically more accommodating, pragmatic and less 'prescriptive' approach to the policy. There are also students who feel this way, although a smaller grouping, and several of these also seem irritated with the idea that the University has to shoulder the burden of conserving Afrikaans. The policy revision process should take the views of this group into account in the revision process.

A persistent theme which has been referred to in the report is that of the marginalisation of African students. These are the students who indicate least positive identification with the policy. Given that race and language cohere as variables with regard to symbolic aspects of the policy, the policy revision process should take note of this level of dissatisfaction which can easily, as it has done in the past, assume a highly publicised and politicised form.

- **Teaching and learning**

In favour of the present dispensation is the high level of academic proficiency in Afrikaans amongst lecturers and students. The present Teaching and Learning Policy (draft) advocates a student-centred approach. This includes the idea that teaching should utilise students' strengths, and build upon what they know and can do. Although there is a higher level of proficiency amongst students in Afrikaans than in English, there is also a greater absence of proficiency in Afrikaans than in English. This polarity with regard to Afrikaans should signal caution against introducing more Afrikaans only modules into the undergraduate programme in modules where there are significant numbers of non-Afrikaans speaking students.

There appears to be a fairly high level of bilingualism amongst lecturers, although they indicate resistance in some instances to teaching in more than one language. This level of bilingualism, together with the willingness of a minority of students to learn in an additional language, and the positive response from the Afrikaans/English students to the T-option, points to the potential for exploring ways to legitimate the already occurring forms of bilingual education at the University.

The irritation level towards the T-option is higher than one would like. This issue requires more investigation before one can pronounce upon the ultimate success or failure of this option, since some of the resistance appears to be in the form of intolerance to having to learn with students who do not understand the language. If there were many more English students in A-options, a similar level of irritation could possibly occur in those classes.²

It is evident that there is considerable departure from the specified options, and further, that the degree to which the language provision in a module is successful or not, is dependent on a variety of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. This calls into question the intense debate that has occurred with regard to the language options, and whether there is not another, more holistic and realistic way of dealing with the language policy in relation to modules and language. The policy revision process should consider other methods of prescribing policy, for example, guidelines and principles.

- **Research, community interaction and administration**

² Examples of such irritation with English speaking students asking questions in A-options can be found in the report, "What do students say about their experiences of studying at Stellenbosch University? – Report back from the Identity, Teaching and Learning Research Project" by Brenda Leibowitz, Sharifa Daniels, Ansie Loots, Rose Richards, Darlene Sebrandt, Idilette van Deventer, May 2006.

A minority of lecturers report negative influence of the policy on research and community interaction, and a smaller number report negative influence of the policy on administration. A particularly small minority report a positive influence of the policy on research and community development. The significant minority of negative responses to the questions on the impact of the policy on administration for lecturers could suggest reconsidering the issue of administration within the institution.

As regards the interaction of administrative personnel with students, responses from both groups seem consistently to show that a small minority of students (between 9% and 12 %) have difficulty with the language used in spoken or written administrative correspondence. This does not suggest that the language policy be revised in this regard, but possibly that ways be found to accommodate this minority more effectively. There is a strong indication that administrative personnel are willing to be accommodating in this regard.

• **Advancing Afrikaans within a multilingual context**

There is an indication that Afrikaans is used and promoted (viz, the number of modules offered in Afrikaans, the amount of Afrikaans the administrative personnel report using and the number of lecturers who claim to advance the use of Afrikaans). There is a shift towards greater use of English in A and T options between the stated options and what students indicate they receive, but without a longitudinal investigation, it is not possible to ascertain whether this shift has increased. The evidence shows a marked contrast with regard to the use of South African indigenous languages other than Afrikaans and the promotion of multilingualism. The policy should define more clearly what is meant by a 'multilingual context', and how the use of Afrikaans relates to this context.

Debate about the policy

Although there were respondents, especially students, who indicated appreciation that their opinion was being sought on the matter of the language policy, the fact that less staff responded to it than in 2004, indicates an element of fatigue with either research or dialogue about the policy, or about the policy itself.

What a policy can do

The findings have given a poignant illustration of how Stellenbosch University is an institution where all parties cannot be satisfied with regard to language provision. The choice of which parties should be satisfied, or according to which criteria they should be satisfied, lies outside the scope of this survey, and pertains directly to the vision and mission of the University. One should not minimise the challenges and real difficulties that individuals experience in a mixed language setting. At the same time, however, the data shows that there are people who are responding relatively successfully with the challenges posed by the context. The policy revision process should bear in mind that a policy cannot solve all difficulties which are reported in the survey, and that it cannot tie up all 'loose ends', and thus that it should not attempt to do so, but should create a realistic and useful overarching framework.

Issues for further research

- Further attention to what happens in classes, what the linguistic as well as non-linguistic factors are, which influence effectiveness of language strategy in the classroom;
- The relationship of language proficiency of students and lecturers to success of a particular language strategy;
- The possibilities of enhancing bilingual approaches towards education;
- The relationship between language attitude, language proficiency and non-linguistic influences;
- Further bibliographic research into the principles of good education language policies;
- Investigation of what aspects of the policy individuals are responding to, and what they believe the policy to be

- Examples of good practice
- More collaboration amongst higher education institutions on the subject of language policy and the language of instruction.