

Principles and challenges of programme planning at a language centre serving two Swiss universities

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1. Introduction

In this contribution, I would like to share some of the professional challenges that I face as Director of the Language Center of both the University of Zurich (UZH) and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich – challenges that would be very familiar to Prof Leon de Stadler, seeing that he himself has been a language centre director in higher education until his recent retirement. During my staff exchange at Stellenbosch University from July until September 2013, Leon and I discussed extensively the opportunities and constraints that language centre directors were confronted with. While I gained a deeper insight into the specific situation at the Stellenbosch University Language Centre, Leon and his staff also became familiar with my language centre's political and financial context. This exchange among peers was continued during Leon's visit to the UZH and ETH Zurich Language Center in 2014 and my shorter visits to Stellenbosch in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017.

The UZH and ETH Zurich Language Center offers language-learning options at various levels in 13 modern languages. The target audience consists of students and staff from both universities and all disciplines. Given current budget constraints, finding an appropriate model for programme planning and financial planning for a language centre that serves two universities has become more complex. In this paper, I describe the challenges of the current model for programme planning and financial planning at the Language Center, and discuss planned measures to deal with these.

2. The current situation

Like many universities worldwide, UZH and ETH Zurich are currently experiencing significant budget constraints. As a result, the Language Center is finding it increasingly difficult to define its programme strategy and to negotiate the financial contributions from each of its two funding universities. In addition to funding, there are three factors that also impede planning at the Language Center.

First, neither university has study programmes that include compulsory language modules (apart from UZH language departments); the credits that students acquire in Language Center courses are therefore considered as additional to their core studies. Only in some cases can Language Center credits be accredited as electives towards students' degrees.

Second, the Executive Boards of both universities decided in 2010 not to formulate a language policy, and so the Language Center had to develop its own programme policy. The current Language Center course programme is based on the programme development principles approved by the Language Center Board of Trustees in 2010. The prioritisation of key areas – the provision of courses for study, research and teaching; for integration; for academic mobility; for future professional tasks; and for the advancement of individual multilingualism – is now in place. Participants' needs have been identified in several needs analyses, and the demand for courses that is evident during enrolments has been taken into account. (Schaffner 2013).

Third, the Language Center is funded on the one hand by both sponsoring bodies and on the other hand by income generated by fees from doctoral students and staff from both universities.

3. Measures planned following the 2015/2016 Language Center evaluation

Based on the outcomes of the Language Center's self-evaluation report, the external experts' (peer) report and various surveys undertaken by the UZH Evaluation Office, the following measures were suggested in the final report as a means of generating more funds:

- a) The Language Center could identify new premium external clients; these could be charged a fee for tailor-made services, and these funds could flow into additional courses for internal students.
- b) The Language Center could introduce an inscription fee for bachelor's and master's students. This could be refunded to students who finish their courses but not to those who drop out.

Discussions among Language Center management staff and by its Board of Trustees led to the adapted measures below. These, upon recommendation by the Vice-President, were presented to the UZH Executive Board at the follow-up meeting and will be part of the implementation plan to be developed by the Language Center and forwarded to the UZH Executive Board:

- a) The Language Center Board will submit a proposal to the UZH and ETH Zurich Executive Boards to introduce, from the autumn semester of 2018, a small course fee for bachelor's and master's students. This should reduce the current dropout rate of 16% and generate funds for additional German as a foreign language courses (two-thirds of the extra funds) and for courses in languages for outgoing mobility (one-third of the extra funds).
The resulting expansion will be based on student numbers – international and mobility students and outgoing mobility students – and on the urgency of demand. This should result in a 28.3% increase in the number of places on German as a foreign language courses and 17.7% for outgoing mobility.
- b) From the autumn semester of 2018, the Language Center will plan a language programme for an additional target group: UZH and ETH alumni. The Language Center has already initiated a pilot project with a needs analysis in cooperation with both alumni organisations. A provisional course programme will be evaluated, including the opening up of existing courses to alumni and courses designed specifically for them. The course fee for alumni will be higher than that for university staff, allowing for the cofinancing of additional student courses.

In order to improve the language policy situation, the following measures were planned:

- a) With the help of the Language Center Director, the Vice-Rector for Teaching at UZH and the Pro-Rector for Curriculum Development at ETH will continue the discussion with study programme directors of both universities about integrating language learning modules into study programmes and accrediting Language Center credits.
- b) The Vice-Rector for Teaching at UZH has set up a language policy working group under the direction of the Director of the Office of the Vice-President for Arts and Social Sciences; it includes the Director of UZH International Relations, the Manager of UZH Communications and the Language Center Director. The working group will present to the Executive Board an overview of language policy factors currently evident in teaching, in corporate identity and in international outreach and mobility at university and faculty level. Based on this research, the group will present possible measures to be taken by the Executive Board in order to create a more coherent and consistent language policy at university and faculty levels. Measures suggested in the paper will affect the Language Center programme development policy.

4. Conclusion

The Language Center Board and management are looking forward to the effects of the above measures. We expect them to facilitate more sustainable programme planning and financial planning. At the same time, we are looking forward to more flexibility in our programme planning and to planning that is more in line with UZH teaching strategy.

References

Schaffner, S. 2013. The impact of language policy issues on program development and management at the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich Language Center. *Language Learning in Higher Education* 2(2): 385-404.