

## **The Rectorate’s perspective on multilingualism and the SU Language Policy**

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## 1. Introduction

According to the Stellenbosch University (SU) Statute<sup>1</sup>, the Rectorate assists the Rector in managing the University. Each Rectorate member has their own delegated responsibilities in managing and administrating the University, as defined by SU's delegation framework. As a committee the Rectorate is not responsible for the revision of the Language Policy undertaken by the task team appointed in terms of the Policy by the Policy owner, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Learning and Teaching. The Rectorate is in a position, and is obliged, to provide input and perspective for consideration in the revision of SU's Language Policy as it does in all matters of institutional importance.

The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as amended, places the responsibility for approval of the Language Policy with Council in concurrence with Senate. The Rectorate's perspective is, accordingly, presented for consideration by the various institutional bodies and committees, staff and students, and interested parties that may consider the draft Language Policy in the process leading up to Senate's and Council's considering it for approval. Individual members of SU Management, too, will participate in the various institutional structures during the revision process and, additionally, as members of Senate or Council.

## 2. Current Language Policy and Language Policy revision process

SU's current Language Policy was adopted by Council in 2016 and came into effect in 2017. We are confident that it has been implemented effectively so far. Planning and monitoring mechanisms are in place, and the faculties and the professional and administrative support services (PASS) provide Senate and Council with regular feedback. Various surveys have been conducted among students and staff, and these have all indicated a significant appreciation for and satisfaction with the implementation of the Language Policy. This does not mean that everything has been perfect. Challenges have come to the fore and have been addressed. However, the current revision of the Language Policy provides an opportunity for further improvement.

The 2016 Language Policy is being revised during 2021 as part of the five-year revision cycle prescribed in the Policy itself. The revision process was initiated in October 2020 by convening a task team. Council approved the task team and process on 30 November 2020. The SU Statute stipulates that Council must determine the language policy of the institution with the concurrence of Senate and in accordance with section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act. The objective is to table a final draft Language Policy (2021) for approval by Council on 2 December 2021.

Since the Constitutional Court in 2019 found the 2016 Language Policy to be constitutionally justified and the University's process in adopting the policy "thorough, exhaustive, inclusive and properly deliberative", the task team used the current policy as point of departure for compiling the first draft of the revised policy for the public participation process.

The revision is informed further by, amongst other sources, SU's *Vision 2040* and *Strategic Framework 2019–2024*, which have been adopted and implemented after the 2016 Language Policy was approved, as well as the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (2020) as stipulated in section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act.

## 3. Strategic direction of the University

SU is directed by its *Vision 2040* to be Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society.

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<sup>1</sup> Institutional Statute Stellenbosch University, *Government Gazette* No. 42636, 16 August 2019

As a research-intensive university we attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities.

The University embraces the diversity of our society and the intellectual wealth inherent in that diversity. Our stated aspirations include being an “integrated academic community that celebrates critical thinking, promotes debate and is committed to democracy, human rights and social justice”. One of our core strategic themes is to build a “thriving Stellenbosch University”, and the goals that we are pursuing to that end include “cultivat[ing] an SU characterised by inclusivity and diversity”.

SU’s values are excellence, compassion, accountability, respect and equity. Of these, respect and equity are most pertinent to language. By respect we mean that “we maintain civility in our mutual and public discourse, and show due regard for the freedom, equality and dignity of all”; by equity we mean that “we pursue restitution in response to our past legacy and fairness in our aspirations for the future”.

SU’s commitment to multilingualism aligns with and supports the University’s core strategic themes and *Vision 2040*. By implementing SU’s 2016 Language Policy, the University creates opportunities for advancing multilingualism in academic and social spaces to increase equitable access to a university education, to foster an inclusive campus culture, and to support student success. Our commitment to multilingualism includes all languages, with a focus on the three languages used predominantly in the Western Cape, i.e. Afrikaans, English and Xhosa.

SU’s commitment to multilingualism derives from a number of considerations and is not merely a pragmatic step to accommodate multiple languages. It is about giving people a voice, regardless of the language they use. It talks to our diversity as a country and allows us to connect in ways we otherwise could not. Through exposure to multilingualism and respect for each other’s cultural heritage and language in our daily interactions on SU campuses, our students develop graduate attributes that mould them into engaged citizens with the skills and attitudes to co-create cohesive and tolerant communities in a diverse society. We are confident that our students have more choices, broader access and a better future as a result of SU’s approach to language.

The SU Language Centre and language departments in particular, as well as academics from other departments, already provide extensive support for multilingualism focusing on:

- *academic and professional literacies* – for example by means of credit-bearing courses within faculties, which enables students to bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education, courses in intercultural communication, and the services offered by the Writing Lab and Reading Lab;
- *language learning and communication courses* in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa for local and international students and SU staff; and
- *language services* – for example translation and editing in 15 languages, the application of plain language and communication design, terminology development and the translation of podcast lecture material, as well as interpreting services in Afrikaans, English, Xhosa and South African Sign Language.

#### 4. Current and future investment in multilingualism

SU makes a substantial investment in multilingualism with ±R44,9 million budgeted for the implementation of the 2016 multilingual Language Policy in 2021, not taking into account the money spent by faculties and by PASS environments for additional language support. This direct investment amounts to 0,7% of SU’s total integrated budget.

An additional ±R90 million should be added to the institutional cost of multilingualism in the form of implicit staff-related costs that include PAS as well as academic staff (e.g. the translation of lecture materials, exam papers, reports, presentations and e-mails). If SU were a monolingual university it would not have incurred these costs. Thus, multilingualism is a deliberate choice with specific institutional objectives and outcomes, but a costly choice with known challenges and complexities. One such challenge is the requirement in the Language Policy Framework to provide all internal official communication in three languages. This has an obvious cost implication (option B in the SU costing document), a concern that may be alleviated by means of the supporting funding proposed in the Language Policy Framework.

The discretionary part of SU's main budget – i.e. funds that are not dedicated to obligatory expenses (e.g. salaries) but are allocated annually – amounts to R318,5 million. The 2021 language implementation budget constitutes *14,0% of these discretionary funds*. A serious consideration in the allocation of funds to institutional priorities is that discretionary funds are fully spent each year on specific institutional expenses. Therefore, any allocation to further expenses (e.g. implementing a full parallel-medium teaching [PMT] option for all undergraduate modules) would imply reallocation: ceasing or downscaling certain other priority activities (e.g. bursaries, Library and Information Services, SU's three research subcommittees, its Contingency Reserve or its Strategic Fund). These activities are of considerable importance to ensure equitable access to SU, to support our research agenda, to allow the University to respond effectively to contingent events (such as the Covid pandemic and fires) by means of our Contingency Reserve, and to exploit new and strategically beneficial opportunities by means of our Strategic Fund.

If spending priorities cannot be adjusted, the alternative is to consider *growing income* to afford greater expenditure on multilingualism. Direct government subsidy and student fees account for 95% of SU's main budget income. Neither of these two income streams can be adjusted at SU's discretion.

- *Government subsidy* is determined by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and is subject to the same fiscal difficulties as the remainder of the national budget.
- SU's ability to increase *student fees* has also been curtailed in recent years. The government has announced an annual "social compact" or "guideline" for university fee adjustments since 2015. The DHET is committed to formalising these guidelines in a framework for sectoral fee adjustments, to be applied from 2022 onwards. Such a framework would require – not merely advise – universities to implement the annual fee adjustments announced by the DHET. Its annual guideline, as well as SU's approach, has been to adjust fees to cover the expected rise in the cost of delivering the University's various services, including staff costs and maintenance. For this reason, the annual fee adjustment is inflation related. The DHET, too, is likely to base their annual regulated fee adjustment on inflation, as they have done with their guidelines in recent years.

Since SU budgets for a balanced main budget, any substantial increase in expenditure for multilingualism would require that a proportion of the annual fee adjustment be allocated to cover those expenses. That would leave SU with insufficient funds for covering the rising cost of other services. *In the Rectorate's view, additional expenditure on multilingualism at the expense of other important institutional objectives cannot be justified, as SU is already spending a significant percentage of its available funds on multilingualism.*

Four scenarios emerged from respondents' feedback during the first public consultation process, namely full PMT – face-to-face, full PMT – technology-mediated, single-medium – English and single-medium – Afrikaans. In the next section, the Rectorate offers a perspective on each of these.

### a) Scenario 1: Full parallel-medium teaching – face-to-face

A full PMT face-to-face option for all undergraduate modules is one option for promoting multilingualism and give so-called equal status and treatment to Afrikaans and English as languages of learning and teaching. Implementing this would necessitate a significant investment, including in additional infrastructure and staff as outlined in SU's costing document, because the available lecture facilities on all five campuses are used to capacity already. The options and limitations of increased government subsidy and higher student fees to cover such costs are set out in the previous section. That leaves the possibility of *growing the University* to absorb the cost of more infrastructure.

National enrolment practices and processes, however, make it impossible for SU to simply *increase its student intake* within the bounds of subsidised programmes. The DHET is responsible for national enrolment planning for all state-subsidised universities in South Africa. Universities submit their enrolment plans to the DHET, who may approve a plan or request modifications. National enrolment practices and processes are subject to parameters set by the DHET, e.g. that the student intake for any given university must remain within a 2% limit of the approved figures, and that penalties may ensue should a university not adhere to the set parameters. Obviously, the DHET in turn operates within the parameters set by national government, such as the amount of funding available for subsidies and for NSFAS bursaries for undergraduate students, which in turn affects the DHET's enrolment planning. Utilising the *additional infrastructure for late-afternoon and evening lectures* to maximise the return on investment poses a high risk to student safety: many of them must travel home after lectures.

A trend that has emerged since the implementation of the 2016 Language Policy is that *fewer students choose the Afrikaans lecture stream* when it is offered as a parallel medium. Undergraduate students at SU who prefer English as language of teaching and learning increased from 65,6% in 2016 to 80,6% in 2021. In 2021, almost all undergraduates with a home language other than Afrikaans preferred English as language of teaching and learning. Among undergraduates with Afrikaans as home language, 49,2% also prefer English – a sharp increase from 2020 (42,5%) and 2019 (35,0%). This is an important consideration regarding a significant investment in PMT.

The *language proficiency of academic staff members* is another crucial facet of the full PMT option. A survey was done in December 2020 and January 2021 to gain insight into the current distribution of home languages amongst SU staff members and the self-perceived language proficiency of academic staff for the purposes of presenting undergraduate classes, preparing learning materials and grading assessments in different languages. Nearly all surveyed teaching staff (97,3%; n = 558) indicated that they would be comfortable presenting undergraduate classes in English, while 58,4% indicated that they would be comfortable presenting in Afrikaans and 0,7% in Xhosa. Similar percentages were indicated for the preparation of learning materials: 98,2% for English, 54,7% for Afrikaans and 1,1% for Xhosa. The distribution for assessments was 98,7% for English, 62,1% for Afrikaans and 0,9% for Xhosa.

The language proficiency of SU's staff poses a significant challenge to the implementation of a multilingual offering because of the impact on the division of labour within academic departments. While language proficiency in a specific language could be included as a recruitment requirement to address this difficulty, the Rectorate's perspective is that the University should recruit the best applicants nationally and internationally and that language proficiency cannot be a barrier to achieving this ideal.

Lastly, although the context and history at SU differ from that at the University of the Free State (UFS), it remains relevant to note that the rationale for the UFS's single-medium language policy was primarily that teaching in English as well as Afrikaans resulted in black/white racial segregation on its campuses: English classes were attended mostly by black students, and Afrikaans classes mostly by white students. That segregation in different classrooms was linked to racial tension between white and black students on the UFS campus. Therefore the UFS argued in court that *PMT could be a catalyst*

*for differentiation between groups of students rather than promoting objectives of inclusiveness, fairness and equality. The SU Rectorate supports this view.*

*Given the financial constraints on the University, the declining demand for Afrikaans lectures, the language proficiency of academic staff members and the potential negative impact of PMT on inclusiveness, it is the Rectorate's perspective that the substantial capital investment, additional annual maintenance cost and additional staff costs necessary to implement full PMT is unjustifiable.*

#### b) Scenario 2: Full parallel-medium teaching – technology-mediated

As an alternative to full PMT face-to-face, technology-mediated PMT has been proposed, which involves dubbed lectures made available after the face-to-face lecture has been presented. Apart from the costs as outlined in SU's costing document, there are concerns regarding the *pedagogical soundness of this asynchronous PMT option*: students who have to rely on the dubbed lecture are denied the benefit of real-time collaboration with the lecturer and fellow students. The synchronous PMT option, on the other hand, offers the other (language) group of students the benefit of real-time collaboration with the lecturer and fellow students. The value of dubbed lectures per se – for purposes of revision, reinforcement of learning material and particularly as a data light option during periods of ERTLA (emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment) – is not in question. *The Rectorate does not support this option on account of it not offering an equitable and pedagogically sound solution, because both language groups cannot benefit from the lecture as an interactive event among students and between students and lecturer.*

#### c) Scenario 3: Single-medium institution – English

Although English as single medium would result in significant cost savings, it is not an option that SU considers, on *legal and Constitutional* grounds. *The Rectorate does not support this option, as it does not align with SU's strategic intent and multilingual objectives as outlined in this document.*

#### d) Scenario 4: Single-medium institution – Afrikaans

Neither is Afrikaans as single medium a viable option for SU, also on *legal and Constitutional* grounds. This is set out clearly in the Constitutional Court judgement in the *Gelyke Kanse* case:

[27] And, of course, as so often in our country, there is a hard racial edge to the differences these facts entail. Two aspects stand out. First, most black (in contradistinction to brown) new entrants to the University are not conversant enough to be able to receive tuition in Afrikaans. Second, seen as a bloc, the new entrants for whom Afrikaans is an obstruction are not brown or white, but overwhelmingly black.

*For these and the institutional reasons outlined for the single-medium English option, the Rectorate does not support this option.*

## 5. Conclusion

This Rectorate's perspective focuses on the four scenarios that emerged from the public engagement phase of the Language Policy review process, and the Rectorate is of the view that the funding of the full PMT options (face-to-face or technology mediated) is neither viable nor desirable in the current context. The Rectorate also does not support a single-medium option (English or Afrikaans), on legal and Constitutional grounds as well as SU's *Vision 2040* and *Strategic Framework 2019–2024*.

Nonetheless, the Rectorate wants to state explicitly its perspective that SU is committed to multilingualism that results in no exclusion and that is aligned with *Vision 2040* and *Strategic Framework 2019–2024*. The Rectorate has strived to outline clearly in this document that multilingualism does hold important benefits for our institution and students, but within the parameters set by SU's current investment in multilingualism and not at the cost of other strategic initiatives.