

# Stellenbosch University

## Report on staff language proficiency

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## Summary

In this report, statistics regarding the language proficiency of staff at SU are provided. An online survey was used to gather the data utilized for this report. A total number of 4543 staff members were contacted to complete the survey, with a feedback response of 1261, or 27.8%.

### Home Language

A question from the survey asked staff to indicate the language(s) they regard as their home language, and multiple options could be selected. This is dealt with in Section 2. From the feedback, it is evident that most staff who responded to this question identify with Afrikaans as a Home Language (63.4%), with 43% of staff identifying with English as a Home language.

Except for Tshivenda, all other official South African Languages were identified as Home languages of staff. There is an almost equal fraction of staff that identifies IsiXhosa (3.4%) and other international languages (3.8%) as their home language.

### Undergraduate Teaching and Learning

Section 3 speaks toward the academic language proficiency of lecturers in undergraduate programmes. Respondents who indicated that they teach undergraduate programmes/modules were required to answer additional questions relating to their language proficiency in (1) presenting, (2) preparing study material and (3) prepare and grade assessment for undergraduate programmes/modules.

The most significant data from this feedback indicate that lecturers feel more comfortable preparing and grading assessments than presenting or preparing study material based on their language proficiency. For example, where only 58.4% of the respondents indicated that they are comfortable presenting undergraduate classes in Afrikaans, 62% indicated that they are comfortable preparing and grading undergraduate assessments in Afrikaans. This could be due to the quality assurance processes within departments/faculties. The assessment tasks, especially summative assessments such as examinations, are moderated, including the proofreading of said assignment.

### Postgraduate supervision

Postgraduate supervision is discussed in section 4. As with the undergraduate section, respondents were required to answer additional questions when they indicated that they are responsible for postgraduate supervision. The majority of postgraduate supervisors indicated that they are proficient in providing postgraduate supervision in English, with about half of the respondents indicating that they are able to provide postgraduate supervision in Afrikaans, or they are comfortable providing supervision in both languages. There is not a strong capability for postgraduate support in IsiXhosa yet.

### General language proficiency

The survey was utilised to gather feedback relating to staff's general language proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing in the official South African languages. This is dealt with in section 5. Since this component addresses the possibility of administrative/non-academic support to students and general official communication, it is necessary to identify whether general language proficiency in at least Afrikaans, English and IsiXhosa exist on campus, as this could have an impact on decisions relating to communication and administrative use of language.

Additionally, staff was requested to indicate which international language(s) they are proficient in. This was the only question that was not compulsory or not required as a follow-up for a previous question and varied responses were received, ranging from fluent to limited.

## 1. Introduction

In this report statistics regarding the language proficiency of staff at SU is provided. The data utilized for this report was gathered through an online survey that was distributed to all academic and professional academic support staff (PASS) in December 2020. Institutional permission was granted for the survey for this report. Contact information was requested and received by the Institutional Permission office of the Division for Information Governance, and the process was compulsory and entirely anonymous. The full survey is available as Annexure A.

A total number of 4543 staff members were contacted to complete the survey, with a feedback response of 1261, or 27.8%. The feedback response per academic faculty is shown in Figure 1 below.

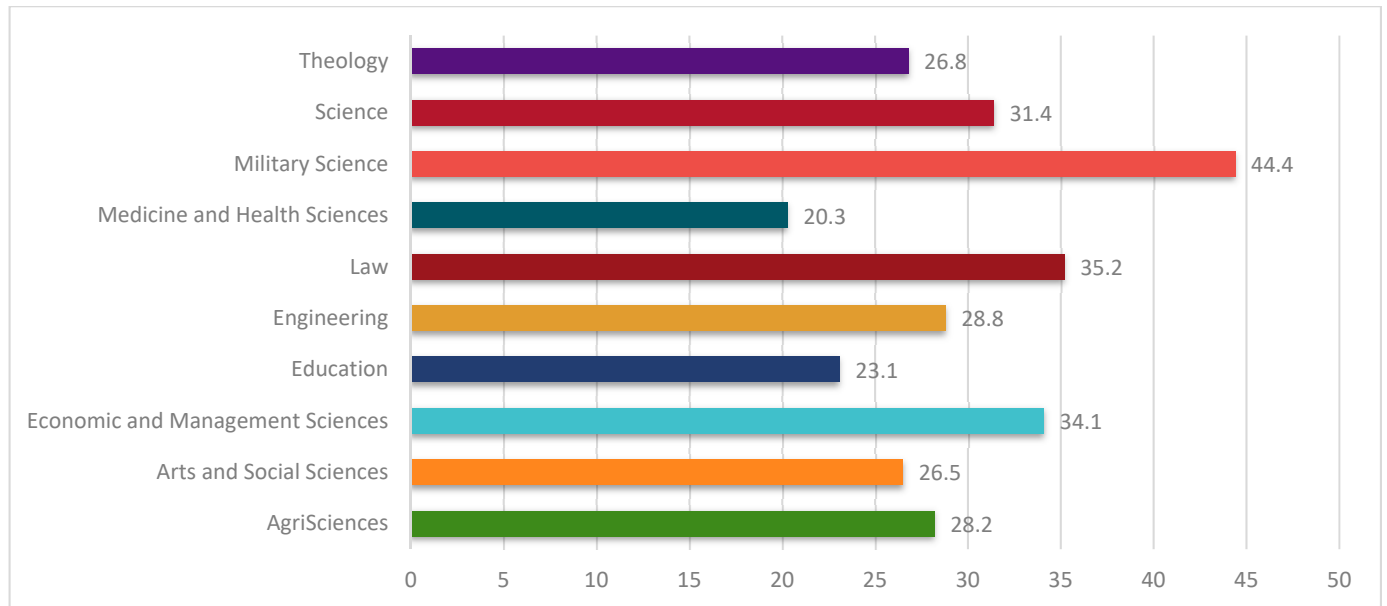


Figure 1 Feedback response per faculty (%)

## 2. Home language(s)

Staff members were asked to indicate all languages they regard as their Home language. As some homes are bilingual, staff could indicate more than one language as their Home language. A total number of 1190 staff members responded to this component of the survey.

Figure 2 summarises the number of staff (in percentage to the responses received) that perceive each of the official languages of South Africa as Home Language. Based on these figures, it is evident that most staff that responded identify with Afrikaans as one of their Home Languages (63.4%), with 43% of staff identifying English as one of their Home Languages.

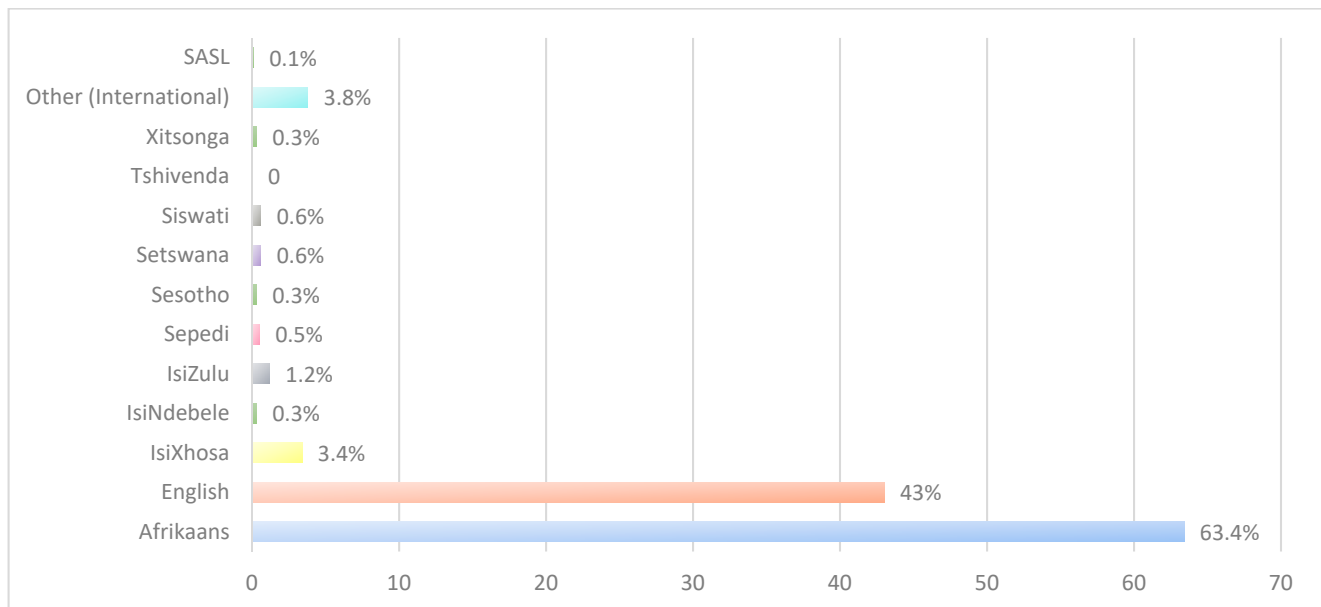


Figure 2 Home Language of staff (n = 1190)

There is an almost equal distribution between staff that identifies IsiXhosa as their Home Language versus staff identifying other languages as one of their Home Languages. These other languages were identified as follows:

- Dutch
- Flemish
- French
- German
- Hindi
- Italian
- Portuguese
- Romanian
- Shona
- Tamil
- Yoruba

The data supports the Western Cape statistics of the most common Home Languages in the province, identified as Afrikaans, English and IsiXhosa. Different dialects of these languages were not considered.

### 3. Undergraduate teaching

The current Language Policy, implemented 1 January 2017, is based on the following two foundational normative principles:

- a. Language at SU should promote access to and success in academic, administrative, professional and social contexts and should not constitute a barrier to students or staff. (2016: 3)
- b. All aspects of the Language Policy and the implementation thereof in teaching and learning should facilitate pedagogically sound teaching and learning. (2016: 4)

Furthermore, the Language Policy respects and acknowledges the use of and proficiency in language by SU students and staff and the complex role of language in our society.

As such, the policy currently provides for the offering of undergraduate modules by any of the following measures:

- 7.1.3: Separate lectures in Afrikaans and English
- 7.1.4: English and Afrikaans in the same class group, supported by facilitated opportunities, of which several are listed in the policy
- 7.1.5: Where the nature of the subject or lecturer's language proficiency requires, the lectures will be provided in one language only.

Therefore, it necessitates that we review whether this is a sustainable language offering based on the language proficiency of academics teaching in undergraduate programmes. An HEI can only be deemed a multilingual institution if the academics can provide teaching and learning (including assessment) opportunities in multiple languages.

558 staff members reported that they are responsible for teaching undergraduate modules and/or programmes and were subsequently asked three questions relating to their language proficiency for (1) presenting, (2) preparing learning material and (3) preparing and marking assessment for undergraduate modules and/or programmes.

Data was aggregated to incorporate:

- all responses that indicated an individual's preference for a language, i.e., if respondent x indicated a proficiency in Afrikaans and respondent y indicated a proficiency in Afrikaans and English, it is reported in the graph as:
  - Afrikaans = 2
  - English = 1
  - English and Afrikaans = 1
- A separate indication of multilingual proficiency

This is done to identify proficiency in each language separately, but also to identify multilingual proficiency where applicable.

In undergraduate programmes and modules, a major component of synchronous activities is focussed on lectures and tutorials. For a multilingual offering, this would require lecturers for undergraduate programmes to be comfortable presenting the discipline in at least one, and where possible more than one of the languages identified by the Language Policy. The language proficiency of lecturers is of utmost importance in enabling students' epistemic access, as the undergraduate programmes focus on several key issues within the discipline – threshold concepts, introduction to vital skills and academic literacy within the discipline. These concepts<sup>1</sup> and skills are central to master the subject/discipline and should the presentation of a module or programme become a stumbling block in students' understanding and grasping of these concepts or skills, many students might never gain access to the conceptual shifts required for learning and development within the discipline. The SU Teaching and Learning Policy identifies the need for the Language policy to facilitate "pedagogically sound teaching and learning" (2018: 4), but also provides that SU should follow a *learning-centred approach* to teaching and learning aimed at facilitating knowledge-building and the shared understanding that learning is deeply embedded in contexts. Language is a critical context and major element of a student's culture, which inevitably influences the teaching and learning culture within an institution.

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer, J.H.F. Land, R. (2003). Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practicing within the disciplines. In Rust, C. (Ed) Improving Student Learning – Ten Years On. Oxford: OCSLD. pp 1 - 16

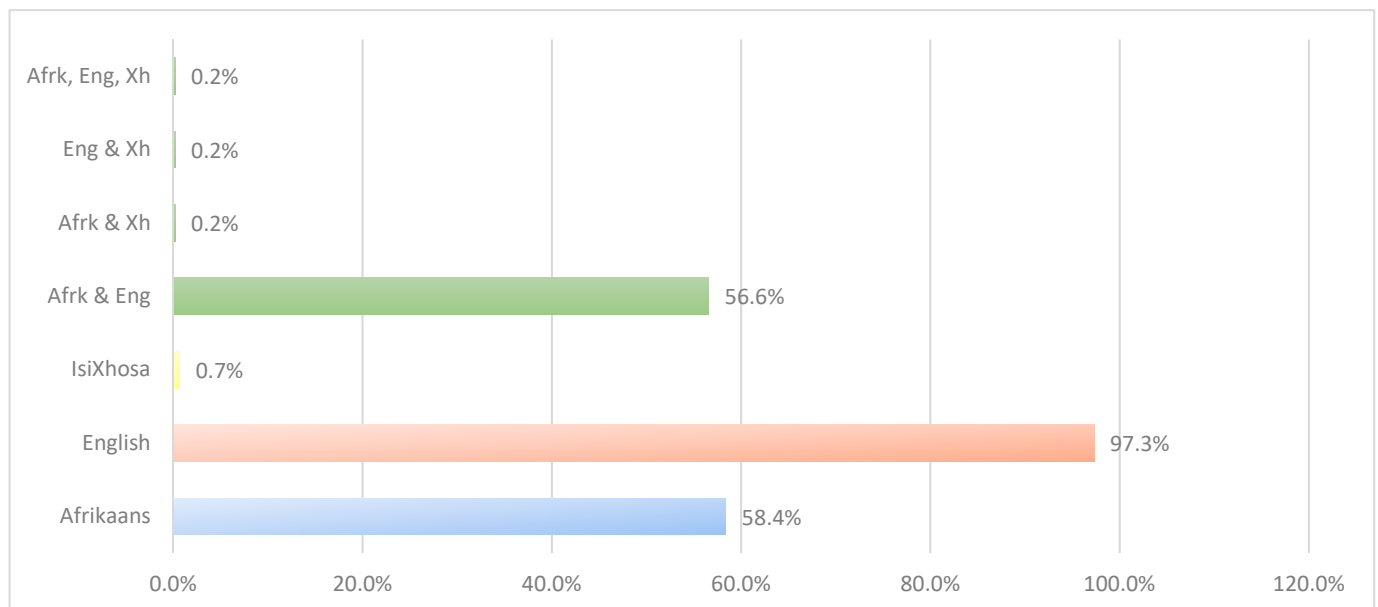
### 3.1 Language proficiency: Presenting undergraduate modules/programmes

The following follow-up question was asked of staff members who indicated that they are responsible for teaching undergraduate modules/programmes:

*Please indicate in which languages you feel comfortable presenting lectures/tutorials/practicals*

As can be seen by the statistics from *Figure 3*, the majority of lecturers for undergraduate programmes indicated that they are comfortable presenting in English, with a large component (58.4%) of staff being comfortable to present in English. Furthermore, the majority of staff are comfortable presenting in both English and Afrikaans (56.6%). However, two needs are identified by these statistics that should be considered during the review of the current Language Policy:

- i. There is a significant number of lecturers that are not comfortable in presenting in Afrikaans; and
- ii. There is not sufficient capacity currently to extend the undergraduate offering in IsiXhosa across the institution.



*Figure 3 Languages staff are comfortable presenting in for undergraduate modules/programmes (%) (n = 558)*

### 3.2 Language proficiency: preparing undergraduate study materials

To gather data relating to lecturers' proficiency in preparing undergraduate study materials, the following follow-up question was asked of staff members:

*Please indicate in which languages you feel comfortable preparing learning material required for lectures/tutorials/practicals*

Regarding lecturers' proficiency in preparing study materials, the data (*Figure 4*) is similar to the statistics from *Figure 3*. However, the data indicates that there are more lecturers that are able to prepare study materials in IsiXhosa, than presenting in IsiXhosa.

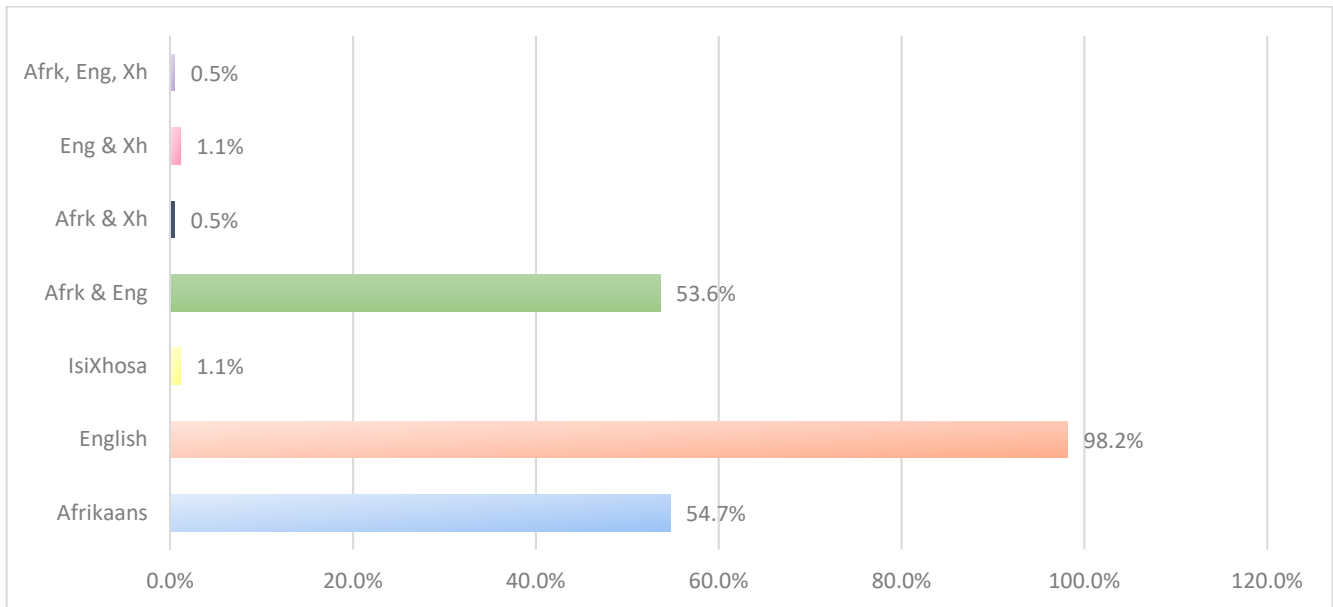


Figure 4 Languages staff are comfortable with in preparing undergraduate learning material (%) (n = 558)

### 3.3 Language proficiency: preparing and marking undergraduate assessments

The final follow-up question relating to undergraduate teaching focussed on assessment:

*Please indicate in which languages you feel comfortable preparing and grading assessments*

The survey responses indicate that lecturers are more comfortable preparing and marking assessments in Afrikaans and/or English (including bilingual) rather than presenting in more than one language. Yet there is a small difference between lecturers who are comfortable preparing learning material in IsiXhosa, versus lecturers comfortable preparing assessment in IsiXhosa.

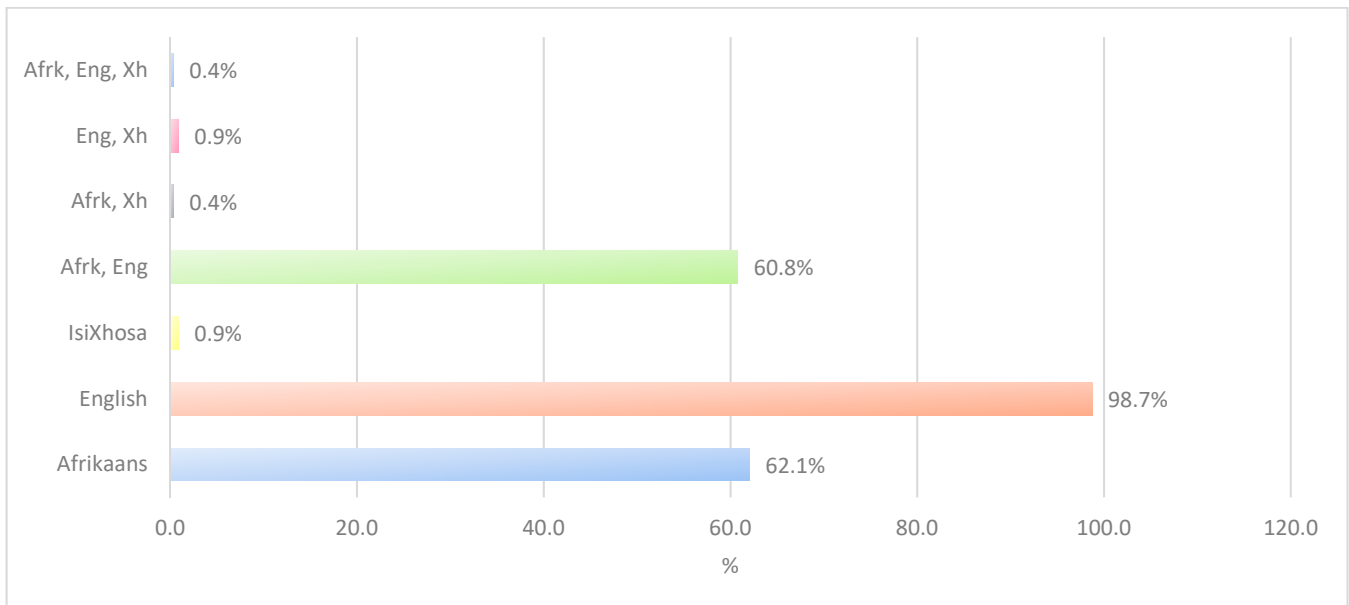
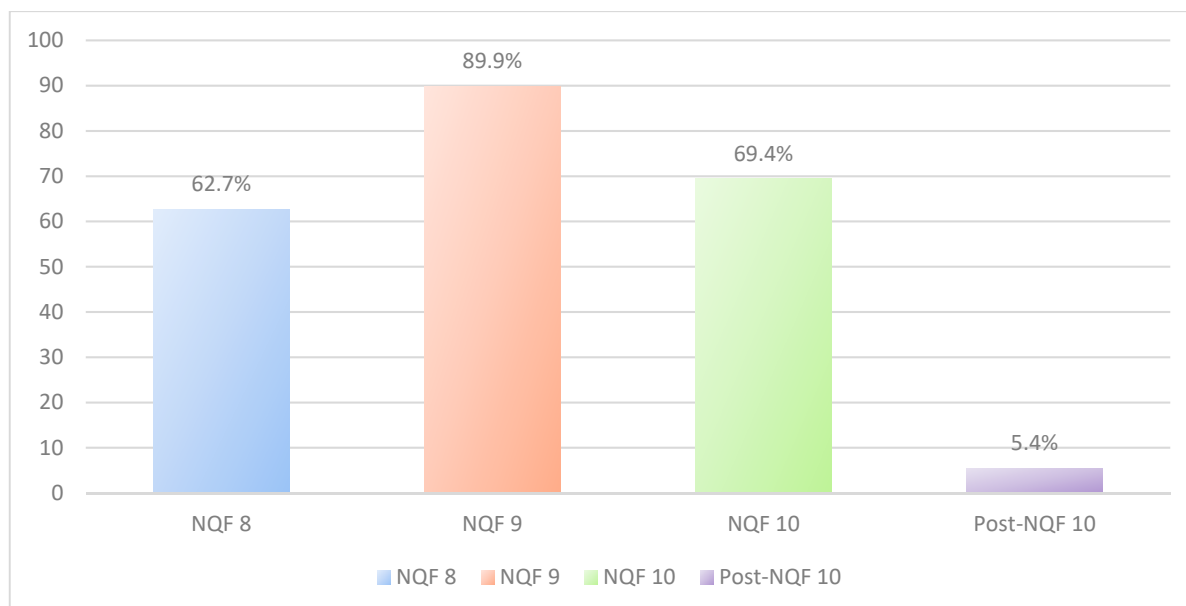


Figure 5 Languages staff are comfortable with in preparing undergraduate assessments (%) (n = 558)



## 4. Postgraduate supervision

From the feedback received, 467 respondents indicated that they provide postgraduate supervision. The data indicated that the respondents provide supervision on all postgraduate levels, including a small number of academics providing supervision on a Post Doctorate level, as visualised by *Figure 6*.



*Figure 6 NQF level of supervision respondents are responsible for (n = 467)*

### 4.1 Language proficiency: postgraduate supervision

The current Language Policy states that any language may be used in postgraduate teaching and learning (NQF level 8 and above) “provided all the relevant students are sufficiently proficient in that language” (2018: 6). However, this would also require that supervisors are sufficiently proficient in the language selected by the students. Supervisors were asked to indicate which language(s) they felt comfortable enough to provide sufficient feedback and supervision to postgraduate students. The data is provided by *Figure 7* below.

In practice, to ensure that all students are comfortable and to enable incorporating feedback from a wider pool of external examiners and co-supervisors, postgraduate programmes have been offered in English. Furthermore, a majority of postgraduate students enrolled between 2016 and 2020 have indicated their home language to be English<sup>2</sup>. To enhance the scope of sources utilised for research purposes, students moreover prefer to prepare their research projects/thesis in English, as this enables them to utilise international sources without losing meaning in the translation of the sources.

The data indicates that the vast majority of staff that responded were comfortable in providing postgraduate supervision in English (98.1%), with almost half of the staff feeling comfortable in providing supervision in Afrikaans or in both Afrikaans and English. Although we would potentially want to increase research outputs in IsiXhosa, it is evident that there is only very limited capacity of staff that will be able to provide the necessary supervision and guidance to students who would wish to prepare their evidence of learning in IsiXhosa.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see data from the *Stellenbosch University Student Language Profile*, compiled by the Division for Information Governance.

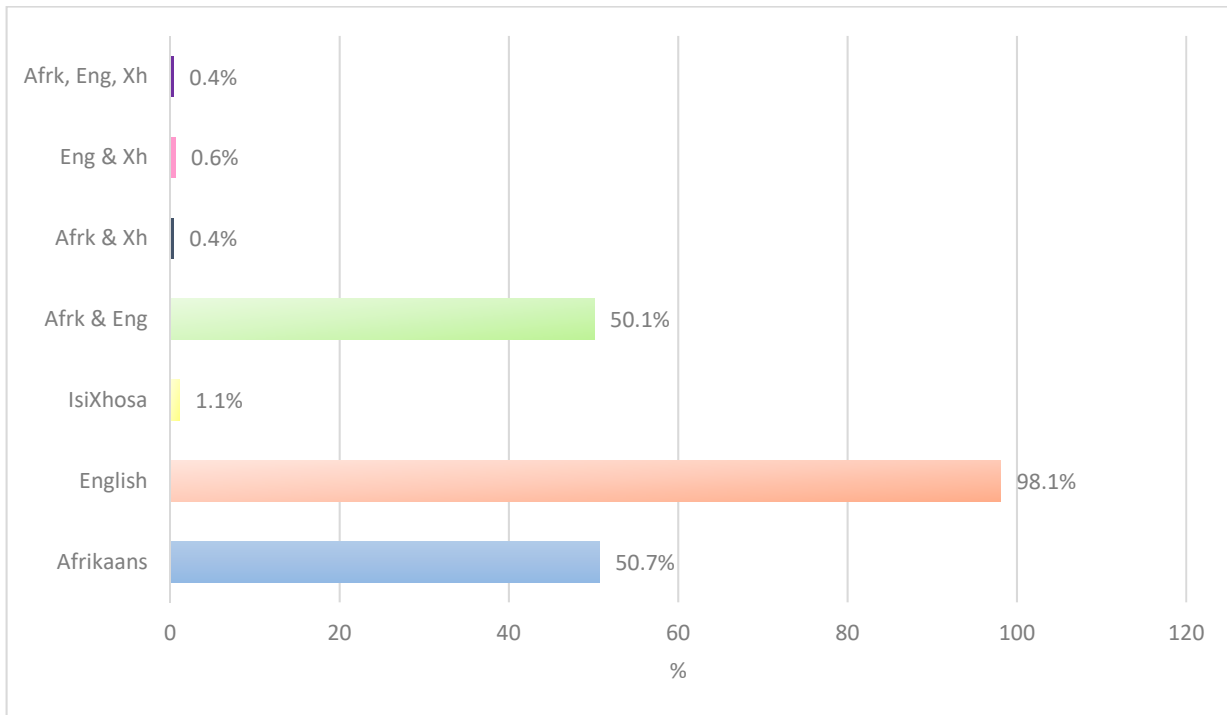


Figure 7 Language proficiency to provide postgraduate supervision (n = 467)

## 5. General language proficiency

The revised CHE Language Policy (promulgated by Government Gazette 43860, Notice no 1160 on 30 October 2020) requires that institutional language policy and plans should “accord greater importance to indigenous African languages” for a variety of purposes, including communication and administrative use (p. 15). It is therefore imperative that we consider what the general language proficiency of staff at SU is.

1163 staff members responded to the questions relating to general language proficiency.

### 5.1 Speaking

The following question was included in the survey to gather information on the spoken language proficiency of staff:

*Please indicate in which of the following South African languages you are proficient in terms of speaking*

As evident from *Figure 8*, the majority of staff at SU are proficient in speaking English (98.5%) and Afrikaans (85.6%). This is an indication that general verbal communication with staff and stakeholders can generally be possible in either of these two languages.

The current SU language policy currently provides for the use of English and Afrikaans, as well as IsiXhosa and South African Sign Language. 8.4% of staff is proficient in speaking IsiXhosa. The student feedback report indicated that 10.2% of the total undergraduate student population for 2020 identified their home language as an official SA language (other than Afrikaans and English). Although it can be anticipated that not all of these students have IsiXhosa as a Home language, the report also indicated that the majority of newcomer first years for 2020 were from the Western Cape, where, as already indicated, Afrikaans, English and IsiXhosa are the most common languages used. The proficiency of staff in predominantly these three languages, support the student distribution in terms of language. It is evident that proficient verbal support can be provided to students when needed.

Although the staff proportion proficient in South African Sign Language currently seems insignificant, the majority of these staff are employed by the Language Centre to specifically provide translation services to students and staff requiring communication in South African Sign Language.

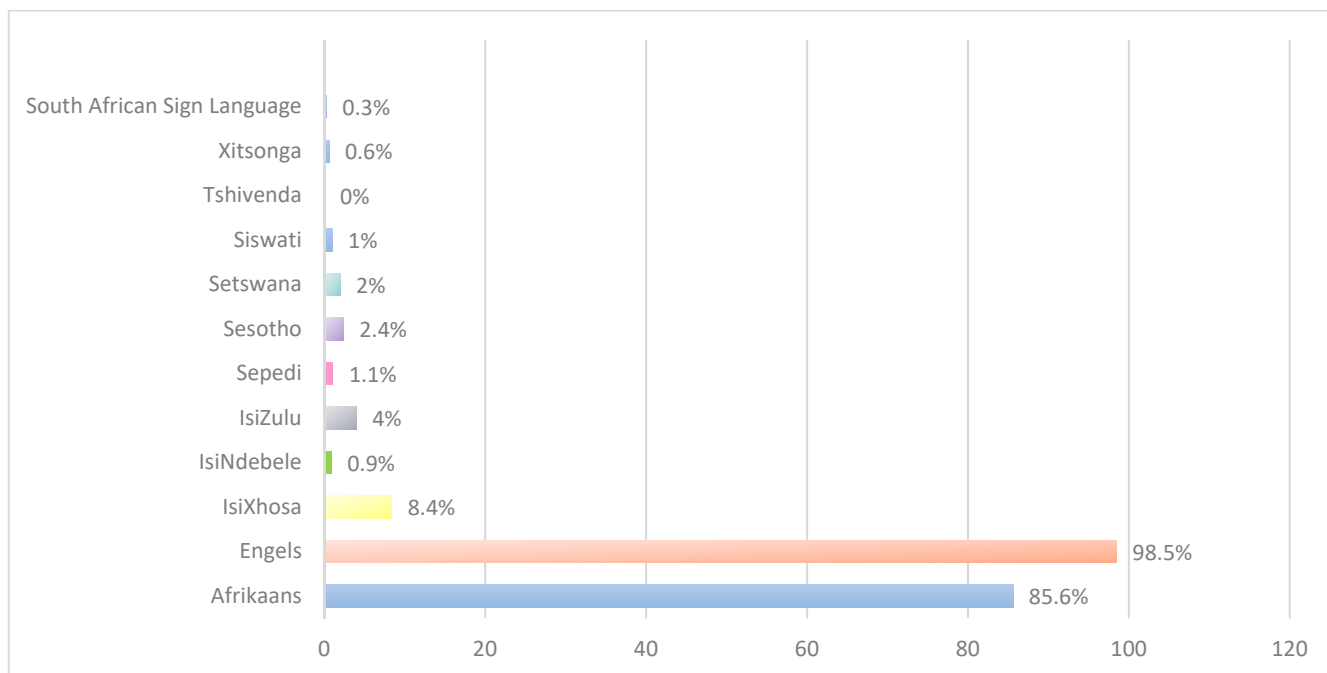


Figure 8 General language proficiency of staff (Speaking) (n = 1163)

## 5.2 Reading

The data provided by Figure 9 indicates a similar proficiency rating for reading to that reported for speaking. Since South African Sign Language is a format utilised for signing the spoken word, this option was not considered for the reading and writing proficiency components.

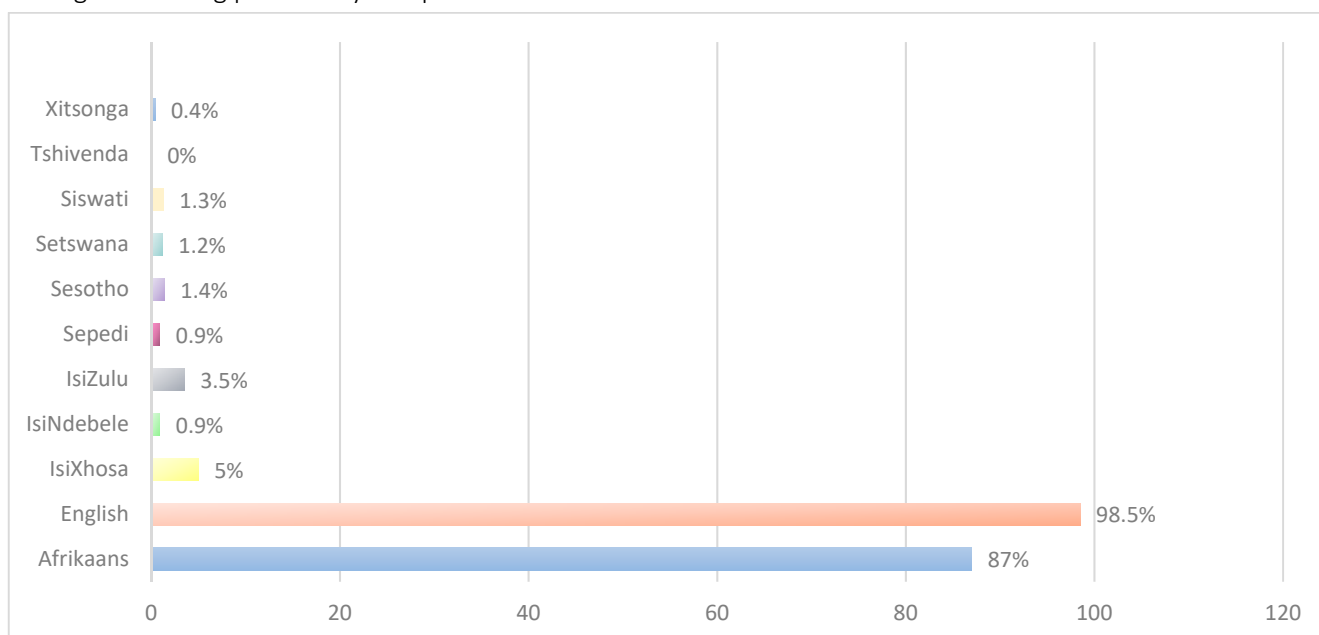


Figure 9 General language proficiency of staff (reading) (n = 1163)

### 5.3 Writing

Whereas Figures 8 and 9 indicated that there is an almost equal comparison between spoken and reading proficiency, these numbers changed quite considerably when asked about their writing proficiency. There was a drop in writing proficiency across all of the languages. It is unclear whether this decrease is related to general writing skills, or whether staff comprehended writing skills to be an indication of good writing skills only.

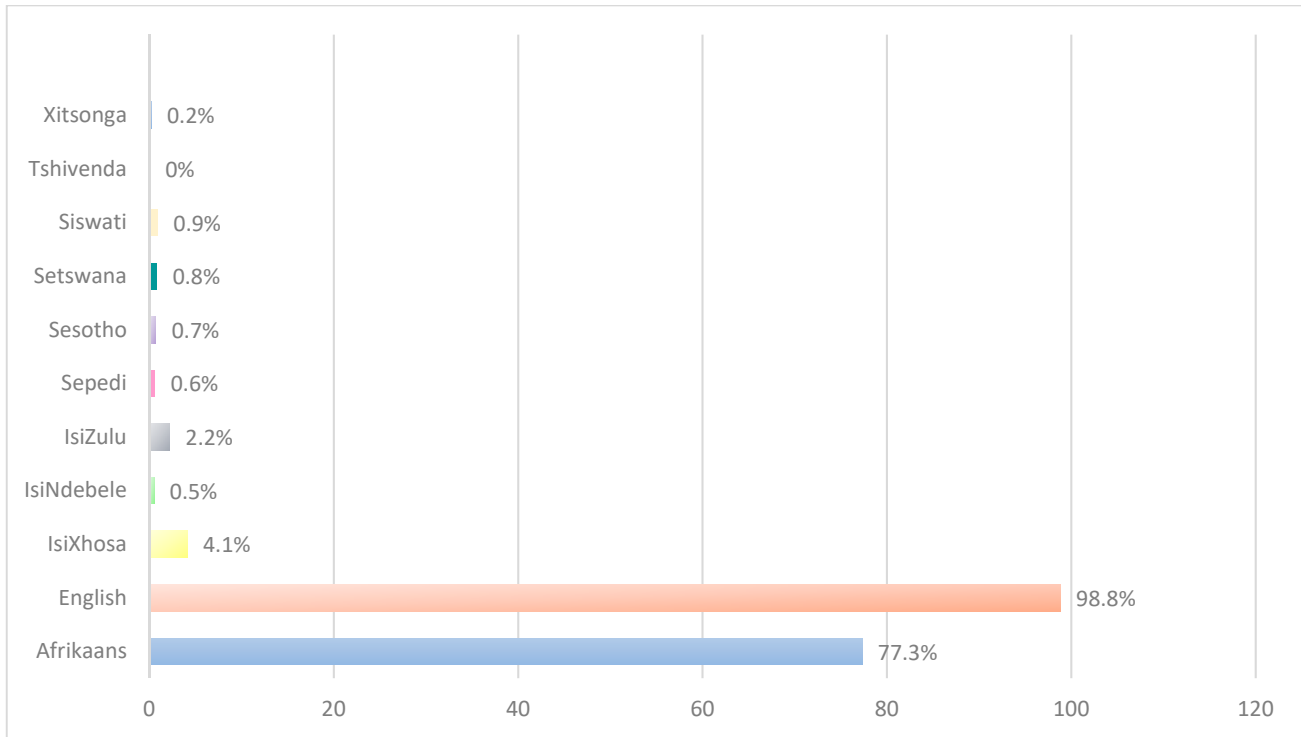


Figure 10 General language proficiency (writing) (n = 1163)

### 5.4 International Languages

The final question of the survey enquired after the proficiency of staff in any international languages:

*Please list any international languages you are proficient (speaking, reading, writing) in*

This was not a compulsory question. 476 staff members responded to this question, of which 288 indicated that they have a proficiency in at least one additional international language. A variety of languages were listed, with proficiency varying from fluent to limited (reading or conversational only) to currently learning the language. The most popular languages listed were:

- German (47.9%)
- Dutch (32.6%)
- French (21.5%)
- Spanish (5.9%)