Recommendations to Rector's Management Team of Stellenbosch University with regards to the Language Policy and use of language for academic purposes

Stellenbosch University Students' Representative Council

Overview

In light of the growing concern about this university's language policy, the SRC deemed it necessary to consult the various levels of campus leadership, in order make recommendations to the RMT. A qualitative consultative process was set in motion where all leadership bodies resorting under the SRC were employed to discuss the relevant issues with their constituents at grassroots level. These constituencies included all residences and PSOs represented by the Prim Committee, all societies as represented by the Societies Council and all faculty committees, represented by the Academic Affairs Council. Representatives of these constituencies then reported back on their internal discussions. All reports were recorded and afforded equal weight and importance. We are pleased with the commitment shown by all the parties involved. They have taken ownership of the initiative, providing us with a rich data sample.

Apart from the consultative processes, students were also encouraged to mail their concerns and suggestions regarding the language policy to the official SRC website. We also received valuable responses here. The final part of the data capturing method was by means of one-on-one conversation with students that approached the SRC at our offices and also by means of conversations started on the Rooiplein, which formed part of the Maroon Mondays initiative.

We are therefore confident in saying that a comprehensive dataset has been compiled over the past three weeks which should lend to the credibility of the issues experienced and recommendations suggested.

We ask that the recommendations be considered by management and that where feasible and urgent, the *Vice-Rector: Teaching and Learning* adopts the Language Policy and the Language Plan in accordance with section 10 of the Language Policy.

The recommendations are based on students' needs and experiences. They address the long term language strategy, as well as interim measures to be taken.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that all classes be taught in parallel medium as is stipulated at section 7(c) with a greater focus on parallel medium and a lesser focus on real-time interpretation in classes.

This is a long term solution which we would like to see accelerated. The current aim is 75%/75% by 2020. We would instead like to see the University be fully parallel by 2020, with clear interim strategic targets set in place.

There could however be exceptions for modules where it is preferable to have the T-option, such as certain modules in the law and humanities faculties. This is only advisable where discussions form a core part of the curriculum and where parallel classes will decrease the diversity of opinion. This will need to be implemented in such a way that students understand all content discussed during a lecture, as opposed to only the 50% covered in their language of choice.

Recommendation 2

The Language Policy and Plan stipulates that Afrikaans and English should hold equal status with isiXhosa being developed as an academic language. The issue is that on the face of it, this interpretation is not evident and furthermore, that the Language Policy aims to "safeguard" Afrikaans above other languages.

We would therefore recommend that section 2 of the Language Policy be rewritten to explicitly afford both Afrikaans and English equal status. If the document necessitates it, we would also suggest that the word "safeguard" be replaced with "preserve" or a more neutral equivalent, to remove any ambiguities with regards to the status of Afrikaans.

Recommendation 3

A large part of the language problem lies in the application of the language policy and plan. This can be addressed immediately, by implementing a structure by which lecturers are held accountable. This is of particular importance in T-option modules, as numerous constituencies complained about lecturers ending up lecturing only in one language, either intentionally or by accident.

In this regard, we recommend that all lecturers undergo a short explanation or course on the language policy in as far as it relates to the language proposition of the modules they lecture. We also recommend that additional assistance in the practical application thereof where necessary. This would be aimed at addressing all issues relating to the implementation of the plan, both for students and staff alike.

We recommend that a standardised form or template be employed in all academic aids, such as slides and other study materials. The reason for this being that in some reported instances, the information conveyed in the different languages were not the same.

Recommendation 4

The Academics Affairs Council (AAC) is constitutionally charged with overseeing all aspects of this institution relating to the academic success of students. The accessibility of language in classes should therefore be one of their primary concerns. The practical implication however, is that the faculty committees are not nearly large enough for this body to monitor the use of language in classrooms.

Throughout the consultation process, the role of the class representatives was notably absent. Students are elected by their peers to represent the class in each module, but are often completely ineffective. We recommend that the system be restructured and that ways are explored in which class representatives can be incentivised to play a more active role in representing the academic needs of students. In return, they will be expected to monitor the efficiency of lectures with specific emphasis on the language used and give regular feedback to their faculty AAC members.

It would be to the great advantage of the student body if class representatives acquainted with the language policy could monitor the use of language on a daily basis. This would allow for failures in the system to be identified immediately, as opposed to the current feedback system by which students review the module only towards the end of the semester.

Recommendation 5

In the light of Recommendations 3 and 4, we recommend that the mechanisms in place to keep lecturers accountable are revised. A simple and accessible mechanism is needed, by which a lecturer can be approached by a class representative with either an informal or formal request to adhere to the language policy, should a lecture deviate from the assigned language option. Further channels should then be made available and accessible, by which a class representative or faculty representative can launch a complaint with the dean of the faculty, in instances where the problem persists.

We note that certain of these mechanisms are already in place, but recommend that they be made more efficient and accessible.

Recommendation 6

In the interim, we would suggest that the translation services be made less cumbersome. Some of the main issues surrounding the translation services are that students are confused when they hear the translation, while still hearing another language in the background.

We note that this issue has been partially addressed in that it is now possible to make use of personal earphones, capable of eliminating external noise. We do however recommend that one set of earphones with this capability be given to each student who will be expected to make use of a translation service, affording all students equal access.

Improving the quality of equipment such as microphones will also prevent the voice of the lecturer from seeping through the translation services, causing confusion.

There can be no doubt that translation services are not ideal. But seeing to it that they will remain essential for the time being, we recommend that management invests in technology that would boost the efficiency and comfort of the service.

Recommendation 7

Various students complained about the current use of language on campus, not correlating to that which they were promised on applying to the university. This issue relates specifically to the Recruitment Office.

We recommend that recruitment officers be expressly instructed to explain the language proposition of Stellenbosch University in a non-misleading way when interacting with potential students. This will allow students to make an informed decision when considering different universities.

Conclusion

We consider the current language policy to be suitable, on the condition that the ambiguity of the status of Afrikaans and English be addressed. The goals set about in terms of achieving parallel medium instruction are promising. We recommend nonetheless, based on the experience of students, that this process is accelerated.

In the interim, the recommendations as set out above, should address the needs of our students. In this regard, the obstacle is not as much the policy, as it is the implementation thereof.