



***COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION***

**LANGUAGE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR  
SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In pursuance of its mandate in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997 to advise the Minister for Education around language policy for higher education, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) established in 1999 an internal working group on Language in Higher Education.

The working group recommended to the CHE that a national Task Group be established to produce a report on a language policy framework for higher education for consideration by the CHE. A Task Group consisting of distinguished specialists in language policy under the chairpersonship of Dr Neville Alexander undertook the task of producing the report, which was submitted to the CHE in July 2000.

This document incorporates the views of the Task Group as well as those of the CHE and is submitted as a combination of information, arguments and recommendations to the Minister for Education.

## **2. BASIS OF LANGUAGE POLICY FOR SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

2.1 The language policy framework for South African Higher Education is based on the following constitutional and legislative provisions:

2.1.1 The constitutional provisions in respect of language in education, especially Sections 6; 29(2); 30; and 31(1)(a) of Act 108 of 1996.

2.1.2 The South African Languages Draft Bill.

2.1.3 Government Notice (No. 383, Vol. 17797) on language policy in (school) education of 14 July 1997.

2.1.4 The legislation guaranteeing the academic autonomy of Higher Education institutions. (The Higher Education Act, 1997 (No. 101 of 1997), especially Sections 26-33).

2.1.5 The recommendations concerning language policy in Higher Education as contained in the Organisation of African Unity's Language Plan of Action for Africa of 1986 and in the Harare Declaration of March 1997.

### **3. MULTILINGUALISM IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA**

3.1 The ability to speak more than one of South Africa's official languages and the development and promotion of respect for all languages used by South Africans constitute foundational values of our post-apartheid society.

3.1.1 The South African Languages Draft Bill postulates, among others, the following objectives of a democratic language policy in a multilingual South Africa:

3.1.2 To facilitate individual empowerment and national development by promoting the equitable use of the official languages and thus ensuring that all South Africans have the freedom to exercise their language rights by using the official language/s of their choice in a range of contexts. This applies in particular to equality of access to government services and programmes, and to knowledge and information through using language and speech technology.

3.1.3 To develop and promote the official African languages and Sign Language/s of South Africa, i.e., Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

3.1.4 To support economic development through the promotion of multilingualism.

3.1.5 To provide for the learning of South African languages by all South African citizens in order to promote national unity and multiculturalism.

3.2 The Working Group on Values in Education, in their report to the Minister of Education entitled *Values, Education and Democracy*, identify multilingualism as one of the six basic values that have to be promoted through the educational system. Among other important propositions, they state that

There are two main values we wish to promote in the area of language, which are, firstly, the importance of studying through the language one knows best, or as it is popularly referred to, *mother-tongue* education, and secondly, the fostering of multilingualism. We do believe that an initial grounding in mother-tongue learning is a pedagogically sound approach to learning. We also believe that multicultural communication requires clear governmental support and direction (Page 15, Italics in original).

3.3 The ethos of the African Renaissance demands that special attention be given to the development and use of the languages of Africa. The simple fact is that there can be no serious talk of a regeneration of Africa without the full development of the African languages. Higher Education institutions are bound in terms of their traditional research and development function to take the initiative in this regard.

3.4 It is recognised that tough choices and decisions have to be made on the merits and cost factors associated with the adoption of mother-tongue education. However, research evidence and current practice point strongly to the advantages of mother-tongue education.

#### **4. THE STATUS QUO IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

On the basis of a survey reflecting the position as at April 2000, the following relevant practices and trends have been identified in respect of language policy at the 21 universities and 15 technikons operating in South Africa.

##### **4.1 LANGUAGES OF TUITION**

Of the 21 universities, 16 use English as the language of tuition. In the other five institutions, English-medium tuition is steadily and often rapidly increasing alongside, and perhaps at the expense of, Afrikaans-medium tuition. This trend is largely due to the demographic shift in the student population at all South African educational institutions, i.e., the fact that increasing numbers of African-language speakers are enrolling at formerly white and formerly coloured or Indian institutions. Stellenbosch is the only university where, at the level of policy, Afrikaans is the only Language of Tuition at undergraduate level. However, even there, it would appear that concessions to English-medium tuition are routinely allowed.

4.1.1 Although the same trend can be observed at technikons, much more Afrikaans-medium tuition takes place in these institutions. Only five technikons offer tuition exclusively in one medium, namely English.

4.1.2 Of the universities that returned the questionnaire on which the survey was based, hardly any can be said to be promoting the use of any African language as a Language of Tuition (except, in most cases, in the relevant language taught as a subject). Only at five universities does there appear to be some informal use of an African language in a limited number of tutorials. As at the end of April 2000, not a single university was officially exploring the possibility of using African languages as language of tuitions except in the relevant language and literature studies.

4.1.3 More use is made of African languages as Language of Tuition in technikons but here, too, such use is extremely limited. At two of the technikons, there appears to be a firm commitment to extend the use of the relevant African languages as Languages of Tuition.

## **4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES**

4.2.1 Besides existing and projected dictionary projects, only a few universities and technikons have the development of African languages as an explicit policy objective. However, the tone and generalised style in which this commitment is usually couched indicate that this is in most cases no more than politically correct rhetoric, which is considered to be opportune in the present dispensation. At two universities and one technikon, there are explicit and carefully argued commitments to the development of isiXhosa, Sesotho and isiZulu respectively, for use in higher order functions, including their use as Languages of Tuition at tertiary educational institutions. In at least one of these cases, there is some indication of an implementation plan with time frames.

## **4.3 GENERAL TRENDS**

4.3.1 Most Higher Education institutions see the obvious solution to their language of tuition problems in a remedial perspective, i.e., what is necessary is that students should be afforded better access to English as a Second Language and academic development or support programmes. In a few cases, especially Historically Black Universities, there appears to be an aggressive attitude in favour of retaining an English-only approach. All the Higher Education institutions have specialised courses for improving students' proficiency in English with a view to promoting academic literacy.

4.3.2 While most institutions are committed in their language policy documents to the development of the relevant indigenous languages, only two or three can

be said to be doing something practical in order to promote their use as Languages of Tuition.

4.3.3 With the exception of Stellenbosch, all formerly Afrikaans institutions have become, to greater or lesser extent, parallel medium in practice, if not in theory.

4.3.4 With the exception of two universities, there appears to have been a noticeable decline in the number of both First Languages and Second Language students of the African languages. A similar trend is discernible in respect of Afrikaans. Investigation into the causes for this decline is recommended.

4.3.5 Although the survey did not elicit any information regarding the pass rates at the 36 Higher Education institutions, on the basis of the data available there is reason to believe that these are generally unacceptably low. While the language-medium factor cannot be isolated as decisive for the explanation of this state of affairs, there is little doubt in the minds of most educators that it is one of the most important factors. If policy were framed in terms of cost-effectiveness, the present situation would be untenable.

#### **4.4 INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

4.4.1 No investigations or studies of comparable multilingual countries were commissioned, and it is proposed that before a final policy on language in higher education is formulated and implemented such studies be commissioned. Experiences of multilingual countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia and India would be instructive. The European Union has a very vigorous multilingual agenda and though the European model might not be appropriate for emulation, its framework for promoting multilingualism could be adapted. The Pan South African Language Board is prepared to explore

the possibilities of joint investigations with the Council on Higher Education and the Department of Education.

#### **4.5 RATIONALE FOR MONOLINGUALISM**

It is often asserted simplistically that all economically successful countries are monolingual. There is in fact no empirical evidence for this view. On the basis of both first principles and intuitive observation, we believe that research will demonstrate that far from being costly in economic terms, a policy of functional multilingualism is the optimal one for the South African economy. It will also demonstrate that the social and political benefits of this model justify the unavoidable initial costs of such a vast project. This is a task that all South African universities and technikons ought to tackle with vigour and foresight as a matter of urgency.

#### **4.6 ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE PROMOTION OF MULTILINGUALISM**

- 4.6.1 In multilingual settings the emerging trend is to have variants of dual-medium delivery at post-graduate level. As a rule, this involves the First Language and English in one or other combination and it affects some disciplines, such as natural science, engineering, technology, more than others. Owing to the colonial legacy in South Africa, the danger that the African languages (other than Afrikaans) will never be developed for use as Language of Tuition at tertiary level is a real one. This implies that for generations the entire educational system will be based on English Second Language or even on English as a Third Language, with possibly more disastrous consequences than what we already have today. Consequently, while recognising the increasingly hegemonic status of English in business and communication globally, it is necessary to establish the foundations for the use of African languages as Languages of Tuition at all levels of the system, however long the process of doing so might take.

## **5. NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION LANGUAGE POLICY**

- 5.1 It has been indicated that several pieces of legislation spell out in general and specific terms provisions for language rights. All national institutions are required to promote these rights.

To give substance and meaning to these rights the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology has tabled a language policy and plan for South Africa that is currently being subject to a costing exercise.

An education language policy can have meaning and validity only when it is firmly grounded in the overall provisions of the national plan. Further, a language policy for Higher Education can only be successfully formulated as part of a comprehensive language policy to cover all levels of the education system. If a policy is proposed for one sector of the system only, it could have unintended consequences for the other sectors.

- 5.2 The financial implications of the introduction of new language policies must also be fully examined. The appropriation of new funding for newly proposed policies and directives has proved problematic. It is essential, therefore that a mechanism to fund new language initiatives be worked out by the National Treasury, and the Ministries of Education and Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.

## **6. COLONIAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION**

- 6.1 In this document no specific comments have been made on the use of either English or Afrikaans in Higher Education, because legally their status is no different from the other languages recognised by the Constitution. However, as South Africa is emerging from a culture of colonial bilingual education, reference to the status of the two languages and their role in education is

appropriate. Rather than referring to the past, it will be more helpful for all concerned if we look to the future.

The survey conducted by the Task Group in April 2000 revealed that the number of Higher Education institutions using Afrikaans was decreasing whilst those using English was increasing. Research needs to be conducted to establish what learner groups are responsible for the increase in the use of English, and what has happened to the learners who are Afrikaans-speaking. In the absence of this data, hasty decisions and policies are inadvisable. Data showing the linguistic distribution of learners in Higher Education institutions with projections for the future should assist in determining what policies should be advocated.

## **7. NATIONAL LANGUAGE PLAN AND POLICY**

- 7.1 In order to assess the cost of implementing the South African Languages Bill, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) is conducting a costing exercise. The results of such an exercise will, undoubtedly, be of immense use to many other departments and sectors. Generally, policies and plans for language in education must be informed by the adopted and implemented national language Act(s). Quite clearly the country has not formulated a final language policy, apart from the recognition and protection of the languages spelt out in the Constitution and general legislation. For this and other reasons, such as the harmonization of language policy across the whole educational system, any policy that is adopted should be an interim policy.

## **8. RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The recommendations below are divided into three categories:

- ◆ Steps that can be implemented immediately.
- ◆ Measures that can be undertaken in the short term.
- ◆ Proposals for medium to long term implementation.

### **8.1 MEASURES THAT CAN BE IMPLEMENTED IMMEDIATELY**

- 8.1.1 All Higher Education institutions must submit full statistics reflecting the position of Languages of Tuition and Formal Academic Languages over the past 3-5 years.
- 8.1.2 All Higher Education institutions must submit a language policy document indicating the steps being taken to provide language proficiency and access to language users of other than the designated Language(s) of Tuition.
- 8.1.3 The role of indigenous South African languages vis-à-vis other dominant and foreign languages must be spelt out as an outcome of institutional consultation.
- 8.1.4 The Ministry of Education must make available to all Higher Education institutions a comprehensive list of documents relating to language education policies in Higher Education.
- 8.1.5 The Ministry of Education jointly with Pan South African Language Board should commission a study of best practice from comparable multilingual countries, such as India and Nigeria.

8.1.6 Funds for the implementation of language-related activities must be earmarked.

## **8.2 MEASURES THAT CAN BE UNDERTAKEN IN THE SHORT TERM**

8.2.1 All Higher Education institutions should develop, in the spirit of the Constitution (see especially section 6(3)) and in accordance with this policy framework as well as in terms of section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act, a specific language policy document with the participation of all stakeholders. This document shall be submitted to the Ministry of Education for evaluation in terms of the policy framework by 31 December 2002.

8.2.2 All Higher Education institutions should participate in facilitating and promoting the goal of the national language policy to develop all South African languages in such a manner that they can be used in all high-status functions, including especially their use as Formal Academic Languages at Higher Education level.

8.2.3 Centres for the acquisition and study of South Africa's main languages of regional and international interaction and trade should be identified so that the necessary resources for promoting the most effective ways of harnessing these languages for promoting interaction and trade, can be concentrated in the appropriate Higher Education institutions. The Ministry of Education should call on Higher Education institutions to submit proposals and budgets towards the realisation of this objective.

8.2.4 One of the tasks of the Higher Education institutions is to promote communicative competence among all students and staff in all the relevant South African languages. For this purpose, besides its Formal Academic Languages, each Higher Education institution should identify and promote the learning of one additional or supportive Language of Tuition. (In some cases, it may be necessary to identify more than one supportive Language of

Tuition). In this connection, the use of language and speech technology for facilitating the acquisition and use of languages other than the home language or the Formal Academic Language should be considered. Funds for the realisation of the necessary training programmes will have to be provided or leveraged by the Ministry of Education.

- 8.2.5 Since all learning is conditioned and facilitated by means of language, policy in Higher Education institutions should ensure access to meaningful, i.e., *effective*, education to all South Africans studying, or wishing to study, at Higher Education institutions. In certain cases, for example, effective learning will be facilitated through the translation of examination question papers into other South African languages even if the actual language of assessment happens to be a different (South African) language.
- 8.2.6 Language policy in Higher Education institutions should also ensure access to appropriately qualified foreign students and academics who wish to study and work at South African Higher Education institutions.
- 8.2.7 Higher Education institutions will normally have one predominant Formal Academic Language for purposes of tuition and assessment but, subject to the provisions of Section 29(2) of the Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996), if resources and numbers permit, more than one Formal Academic Language may be instituted. This proviso accommodates the constitutional requirement (see Articles 9(3) and 9(5)) that language proficiency ought not to be used as a means of excluding would-be students from any educational institution in South Africa.
- 8.2.8 As long as pre-university education does not prepare students adequately for higher learning, Higher Education institutions should make special provision for the attainment of academic literacy in their Formal Academic Language(s) to accommodate students who require such support. Once the situation in

the primary and secondary school system improves and stabilises, academic development and support programmes may be adapted or phased out.

### **8.3 MEASURES THAT CAN BE IMPLEMENTED IN THE MEDIUM TO LONG TERM**

The recommendations under this section are for long term implementation. Certain actions and activities may be undertaken in the short term as preparatory work, but the implementation of these measures must be carefully considered and due regard given for their financing in the long term.

- 8.3.1. As part of the facilitation and promotion of the national language policy in Higher Education, Centres for Language Development should be identified and be located in designated Higher Education institutions. The Centre should undertake the research and development work required in the case of each of the marginalised official and endangered South African languages. Such a “Centre” could be distributed across various Higher Education institutions in a region, or in several regions, depending on whether the particular language is a disciplinary focus of the institution or whether it has the relevant expertise. The distribution of tasks as well as of the resources that would go with the development projects should be negotiated between the Ministry of Education and the Higher Education institutions concerned. These Centres should be established and funded by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) and should of necessity liaise with these organs.
- 8.3.2. A step-by-step development and implementation plan should be formulated for each of the relevant languages such that among other things, it will be clear when they will be able to be used as Languages of Tuition in specific disciplines and fields. However, the decision about when to begin using the languages concerned for specific functions should be the prerogative of the relevant Higher Education institutional community.

8.3.3. Academic and administrative staff should be encouraged to acquire proficiency in relevant South African languages in order to enhance the quality of their communication with students and with colleagues as well as with the rest of the relevant institutional community. The need for academic excellence precludes prescription in respect of language proficiency as a criterion for the selection of academic staff (except in language subjects themselves) but practice should give preference to suitably qualified multilingual staff at all levels and in all aspects of institutional life. Appropriate methodologies for teaching in multilingual contexts should be encouraged.

8.3.4. Language surveys of both students and staff should be conducted regularly in order to ascertain shifts in the language profile of the relevant Higher Education institutions so that language policy and practice can be adapted, if necessary. This task can be facilitated if Higher Education institutions build an appropriately designed linguistic component into their databases