



Network project for the decentralised and centralised  
dissemination of TNP3 results and outcomes

## **Current and Future Linguistic Needs of Graduates on the European and International Labour Markets**

European Conference, Brussels 27 September 2007

### **Introduction**

There is no doubt that higher education must be more responsive than ever before to the needs of the economy, the labour market and society at large. This is particularly true in the area of languages, where globalisation, European enlargement and technological advances have brought about rapid changes in the way language skills and intercultural communication and mediation skills are perceived by employers and other decision-makers. It is against the backdrop of these developments that the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III, TNP3 (2003-2006) and its follow-on project TNP3-D (2006-2007) were launched.

The aim of this paper is, in a relatively brief format, to provide background information for participants in the European Conference *Current and Future Linguistic Need of Graduates on the European and International Labour Markets*. Participants interested in further information on the outcomes of the projects than what is given below, are advised to consult the project web sites that may be accessed through [www.cel-elc.org](http://www.cel-elc.org).

### **Background**

The third Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III (TNP3, 2003-2006) brought together project partners from over 60 higher education institutions and stakeholders from the world of business, government and other levels of the education system. In the first phase of the project, partners produced national reports identifying the (then) current state of affairs as regards the demands for language and language-related competences on the labour market as well as the extent to which higher education institutions actually met these demands in their programmes.

With the conclusions of these reports as their point of departure, surveys were then conducted among employers and graduates (employees) across Europe in the second phase. These surveys mapped out the current needs for foreign language and intercultural competences and skills in Europe. And based on the results of the surveys, project partners finally discussed how these needs could best be met by the institutions training the high level language experts and language users of tomorrow.

Many important trends were identified. In particular, the range of languages and the variety of skills required, including non-linguistic skills, were found to have been expanding rapidly since the turn of the century. New specialist skills were found to be in demand both by the language industries, by the wider business community and by national and international organisations.

On the basis of these findings, recommendations were drafted as to how university language programmes and courses can best be adapted to these changing needs by defining new objectives, contents and ways of learning. And because universities are now more than ever part of an educational chain stretching from primary school to higher education in a lifelong learning context, these recommendations have to be seen in the wider context of national language policies and resource allocation.

The national or regional aspect is all the more important because the results of the surveys and consultations with stakeholders clearly showed that there are considerable differences in the state of affairs across Europe. For instance, while the countries that have recently joined the European Union are still training translators and interpreters in order to meet the demands for translation and interpretation to and from their official languages, other countries only have a limited need for training new translators or interpreters for the EU language services. In these countries, HE institutions rather focus on training language experts for the private market.

TNP3-D (Network for the decentralised and centralised dissemination of the results and outcomes of the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III) is the follow-on project to TNP3. Because of the regional / national differences identified in TNP3, TNP3-D has held four regional conferences in 2007 (Aarhus, DK; Braga, PT; Southampton, UK; Warsaw, PL) and will conclude with the European Conference in Brussels 27.9.2007. The idea has been to present the outcomes of TNP3 to a wider audience and to discuss these and the recommendations derived from them in a regional / national context.

This document sums up the results of TNP3, and of the TNP3-D Regional Conferences as regards the current and future linguistic needs of graduates on the European and international labour markets. The document is in two parts:

1. Which languages, skills and competences for the language-related industries and professions?
2. Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labour market.

## 1. Which languages, skills and competences for the language-related industries and professions?

### Current situation

As a result of socio-economic and technological developments in an increasingly globalised world, there is an increase in language-related activities across Europe. In particular, in the countries that have recently become members of the European Union, this has resulted in a considerable growth in the demand for language services.

This would seem to be a favourable situation for language graduates in Europe. However, HE degree programmes, the graduates of which should be able to meet the new demands on the labour market of today and tomorrow, are not in place everywhere. In quite a few instances, adopting to the Bologna structure of 3+2 has resulted in minor alterations rather than new curricula reflecting the competences and skills needed. This pertains in particular to first degree programmes, whereas the second cycle programmes generally seem to be more innovative and better reflect the diversity of language and language-related needs.

In this context, it is important to note that there are considerable differences between countries, and also within individual countries, and it is expected that the re-structuring of HE programmes, within a relatively short time span, will generate a systematic change in teaching methods, e.g. by facilitating more independent work and autonomous learning. This should enhance some of the basic skills needed. Furthermore, alliances between HE institutions (HEIs) and employers seem to be becoming more and more frequent, and an increasing number of alumni and professional associations work in close collaboration with the HEIs on the development of new courses and course modules.

It is regrettable that, with very few exceptions, language study programmes seem to be faced with falling student numbers across Europe. At the same time, students entering the language degree programmes do not always have the same high level of linguistic competences that could previously be expected. This unfortunate situation applies to their first as well as their foreign languages.

This situation within higher education language learning and the training of language specialists is all the more problematic because of the current changes in the language-related industries and professions, in particular as regards new technologies; new languages on the market; and the increase in freelancing and outsourcing which in turn requires more quality control. Finally, it is often difficult to infer from consultation the exact nature of the new needs that the graduates are expected to meet.

That said, there is a general trend that employers want graduates to better master their first and foreign languages; linguistic precision; domain-specific knowledge and terminology; IT applications (computer literacy as well as special applications in the language industries); and a better understanding of the business context. - As far as the professional competences (linguistic, textual and

communicative skills) are concerned, increased general awareness is needed in areas such as language proficiency, communication, different genre conventions, and proof reading, revision & editing skills.

### **What will be needed in the future?**

The languages needed seem to be the individual's first language, English, the less taught/studied European languages as well as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Hindi. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions as regards the current major European languages such as French, German or Spanish.

In addition to this, language specialists are faced with increasing demands for non-language competences in areas such as ICT, knowledge management, corporate communication, project management, intercultural communication or cultural mediation, research and other complementary skills. This is a rather tall order as these demands cover linguistic, communicative, cultural, social, computing, organisational, ethic and other skills. There is a need for specialists who are able to deal with languages in different electronic formats, and for professionals who are capable of applying and developing skills that go beyond the mere knowledge of a language, e.g. in international advertising or web design.

Professional competences apart, employer representatives strongly recommend that the development of a specific set of personal competences be enhanced in training programmes: The ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines; project management skills; the ability to work in cross-disciplinary teams. All of this is facilitated by an extrovert personality. Whereas this cannot be taught in a HE programme, student counsellors should keep it in mind when they advise students on specialisations and career tracks.

Collaboration between HEIs and representatives from the world of work is indispensable. Teachers must possess an updated knowledge of market conditions in the language professions, and internships will generally heighten students' understanding of the working conditions on the professional labour market.

Furthermore, while employer representatives expected HEIs to ensure that graduates were familiar with pertinent technological tools, the HEIs point out that, more often than not, the cost of software licensing of special applications such as state-of-the art CAT (Computer-Aided Translation) programs makes it prohibitive for HEIs to buy and install them. If students are to be introduced to these programs, collaboration with major players on the translation market (translation agencies) must be put in place.

Another challenge is the fact that many students, in particular in the southern and eastern parts of Europe, cannot afford to study abroad in countries where the cost of living is much higher than in their home countries. This prevents the students from studying their chosen languages in the cultures and countries where they are the first or official language.

No curriculum can lead to the development of all possible language-related competences, but new curricula should be developed based on clearly defined professional profiles. First cycle programmes should focus on the acquisition and mastery of the second or third language(s), whereas the second cycle programmes should allow for a range of specialisations.

Language graduates of the future must be able to perform a set of varied and multifaceted activities that go beyond the traditional competences in translation and interpreting, and they must be able to adapt their training and work experience to new needs as these arise. Therefore, they must be multi-lingual, multi-skilled, multi-specialised, flexible, and have an international mind set.

### **Recommendations: Languages and language-related industries and professions**

- HEIs should collaborate and consult with external stakeholders (employers, employer organisations, alumni, etc.) in order to ensure that the learning outcomes and the competence profiles of their programmes match the needs and the demands of the labour market to the extent possible. This does not imply that employers should demand specific skills and competences, but rather that both parties should benefit from an informed and ongoing dialogue.
- Many graduates will seek employment beyond their immediate environment. It is therefore important that learning outcomes and competence profiles are clearly defined and described in order for graduates to be able to document their educational background also in geographical areas where their HEIs are not immediately well known.
- Only a limited number of graduates will find employment in what has traditionally been known as the areas of translation and interpretation. Technological advances have created many hybrid forms of language mediation, and graduates should be able to navigate in these new areas of – often multimedia - communication. However, this presupposes that teachers and those responsible for university programme development and change are in fact familiar with these technological developments and their implications for mono- or multilingual communication and mediation, and that university programmes are changed in order to also cover these new forms of communication.
- Many programmes that attract students and make them well equipped for the changing labour market, are interdisciplinary. Such programmes should be further developed in order to prepare students for the realities of the workplace. There is no doubt, however, that not all programmes can include all non-linguistic skills and competences mentioned above, and it is therefore vital that specific learning outcomes and profiles be developed for all programmes so that potential students as well as possible future employers know what they should expect.

- Many of the non-linguistic competences required on today's labour market need not necessarily be taught courses, however. They could be integrated as (new) modes of teaching and learning. This applies, for instance, to important topics that are mentioned again and again such as project management, independent work, team work, presentation skills, etc. Furthermore, case work and problem-based learning as well as simulations / role plays in which students are forced to work in real-life situations (e.g. observing strict deadlines), will all add to their understanding of the business world in which most of them will be working after they graduate.
- Not only the HEIs, but also their students, should collaborate with the world of work. This can take many forms, but internships are always mentioned as an obvious example. However, using data from relevant businesses or organisations in their major independent work such as Bachelor or Master theses is another way of adapting what they have learned to the realities of the workplace and of familiarising themselves with the work conditions outside the sheltering walls of their HEIs. This, obviously, takes it for granted that the students have been prepared for such work as part of their set courses.
- Lifelong language learning is an important concept, and programmes should ensure that students and graduates are equipped to continue their language learning as well as further develop their intercultural and mediation skills if and when the need arises in their professional lives.
- Last, but certainly not least, students should graduate well aware of the fact that what they are aiming at is a moving target, and they should therefore be equipped to handle a constantly changing professional environment and thus also a constant change in what they will be required to do in order to keep at the forefront of developments and stay employable.

## **2. Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labour market**

In order to succeed in a European Union of 27 countries, with increasingly mobile Europeans, and with considerable immigration into Europe, as well as in international cooperation, transportation and trade, Europeans should master their first language (mother tongue) and be well versed in two more languages. This not only applies to language specialists, but to all professionals and, indeed, to the vast majority of Europeans.

The TNP3 and TNP3-D surveys and consultations have underscored again and again that English is necessary, but English is not enough. On the contrary. In many parts of Europe, English skills are taken for granted, and what gives the individual graduate a competitive edge on the labour market is his/her skills in other languages. The graduate's first language plus English is considered part of their soft skills and are often not even taught. That, however, does not always reflect the students' real needs. Many students and graduates do in fact need to

improve their first language as well as their English skills in order to be able to make coherent oral or written presentations (PowerPoint slides) or to enter into dialogue or negotiate with foreign language partners.

### **Current situation**

TNP3 has addressed these important issues in an attempt to map the current situation. First of all, there is a change in European economies and in workplace realities. There is an ongoing shift from the industrial to the service sectors; an increasing amount of off-shoring or out-sourcing both within and without Europe; and there are new modes and patterns of working.

These socio-economic developments entail a change in linguistic needs. Communicative language skills are needed for European and global interaction on a large scale; and for the individual, these skills are needed in order to change careers and sustain employability.

As a result of the questionnaire consultation and of discussions at the TNP3-D regional conferences, the following picture emerges as regards workplace-based language use and the competences and skills most needed:

More than half of the respondents to the questionnaires are working or have worked abroad; their language needs are situation dependent, and there is an increasingly fuzzy demarcation between the jobs (tasks) taken on by non-language and language graduates respectively.

Communicative language skills seem to be most important: Understanding and interacting with people from other languages and cultures face to face or via electronic means of communication, including telephoning. This applies in particular when travelling, hosting visitors, or engaging in (informal) social situations at work.

In a professional context, it is important to be able to follow discussions; give presentations; interact in discussions; manage international relations; and engage in international negotiations (team work or customer-supplier contacts).

As far as reading and writing is concerned, this pertains specifically to short factual texts or e-mails; reading specialised articles or reports; and summarising or reporting on them.

This results in a diverse set of needs for language skills as well as intercultural communication or language mediation skills. Professionals need to be able to establish and maintain relationships across different cultures and value sets; to understand people in different contexts; to be open, empathetic and flexible; to defuse nascent tensions; and to promote harmony in intercultural settings.

As for the question of which languages are needed, the short answer is that English alone is not enough. French, German and Spanish are also needed,

and the same applies to Russian, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Dutch, Arabic, and Portuguese (in descending order). There is a need for the languages of the new EU Member States and for a generally global outreach.

### **What will be needed in the future?**

The situation described above will no doubt also apply to the foreseeable future. This has resulted in the following recommendations to the HEIs:

Curricula need to be developed so that courses are in fact relevant to the labour market. Language programmes or language modules in combined programmes should focus on communicative skills with clearly defined learning outcomes and competence profiles. Graduates should be able to seamlessly deploy electronic tools.

Based on consultation with labour market stakeholders, HEIs should therefore develop realistic and well-defined descriptors for graduate performance in languages; and they should apply the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in order to have transparent and intelligible course descriptions.

In order for students and graduates to meet the changing demands on the labour market, HEIs should ensure that students develop a general awareness of the language learning process as well as an understanding of language systems and language families.

Collaboration and continuing consultation with stakeholders is essential. Here the level (European, national, local) should match the purpose of the consultation, serving to promote mutual understanding between the parties and create a common language by means of which these consultations are conducted. Thus areas of curricular reform can be identified, emerging needs be highlighted, and awareness of language issues be raised.

HEIs are advised to develop language policies; to facilitate a wider understanding as well as innovative approaches to language and subject specific learning; to expand outcome-based language learning; and to support more flexible and independent learning modes.

### **Recommendations: Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labour market**

- HEIs should collaborate and consult with external stakeholders (employers, employer organisations, alumni, etc.) in order to ensure that the learning outcomes and the competence profiles of their programmes match the needs and the demands of the labour market to the extent possible. This does not imply that employers should demand specific skills and competences, but rather that both parties should benefit from an informed and ongoing dialogue.

- In order to accommodate the content of the students' primary subjects (engineering, law, business, medicine, etc.), language and communication courses have to a large extent been left out of the curricula. However, if students are to be prepared to work in the global market place, whether in their home country or abroad, they must also master foreign language and intercultural mediation and communication skills. It is advisable that the language and communication modules be the result of a university language policy and preferably an obligatory element in the curriculum.
- Many graduates will seek employment beyond their immediate environment. It is therefore important that learning outcomes and competence profiles are clearly defined and described in order for graduates to be able to document their educational background also in geographical areas where their HEIs are not immediately well known. This obviously also applies to the language and communication modules of non-language programmes.
- Language courses should focus on generic skills; in other words, the students should learn how to learn languages and how to apply generic skills to specific, concrete situations. Lifelong language learning is an important concept, and programmes should ensure that students and graduates are equipped to continue their language learning as well as to further develop their intercultural and mediation skills if and when the need arises in their professional lives.
- Last, but certainly not least, students should graduate well aware of the fact that what they are aiming at is a moving target, and they should therefore be equipped to handle a constantly changing professional environment and thus also a constant change in what they will be required to do in order to keep at the forefront of developments and stay employable.

There is no doubt that for many HEIs, it is a novelty to discuss languages as part of the curriculum for all students. However, there is also no doubt that this is needed on the European labour market, and that HEIs should face this new challenge rather sooner than later.

### **Further projects**

Especially as regards languages for employment on the European labour market, further projects are necessary in order to develop the following:

- Consultation and dialogue between HEIs and the world of work in order for the HEIs to get a clearer understanding of the market needs, but also for the employers and other external stakeholders to get a better understanding of the relevance of language and intercultural skills to competitiveness. Studies in several European countries have reported on business lost due to lacking foreign language and intercultural communication skills.

- Project(s) to develop descriptors of relevant language skills so that a common language be developed for HEIs and external stakeholders to discuss these issues and for HEIs to properly define the expected learning outcomes and skills profiles of their programmes. Such descriptors should be anchored in the Common European Framework of Reference, but should also be linked to the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and reflect professional language use.

### **Further outcomes of regional conferences**

In addition to what has already been mentioned above, the TNP3-D regional conferences stressed following issues:

- The importance of seeing immigrant languages as a resource. Examples of best practice form which others can benefit should be identified, for instance so that students whose first language is not the official language of their country of residence could actively use their individual language regimes as an integrated part of their HE programme.
- The importance of tracking alumni, map their careers and consult with them as regards emerging needs on the market, for instance in programme advisory boards or similar bodies.
- The importance of seeing education in a global perspective and of preparing students for change, mobility, and lifelong learning.
- The need for well-trained third-level teachers (university pedagogy).
- The introduction of Diploma Supplements across Europe to enhance transparency of HE programmes, their intended learning outcomes, and competence profiles.
- The issue of quality and quality assurance is more important than ever to European HEIs within the general framework of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2005).

### **Concluding remarks**

It goes without saying that a relatively brief document like this one must limit itself to presenting the general trends of the project outcomes and results, and these general trends cover considerable regional and national differences, and even differences between organisations in more or less the same location. However, there is no doubt that in a multilingual and multicultural Europe and, indeed, in a globalised world, multilingual communication is a *sine qua non*. This situation requires language experts as well as a work force able to communicate in job-specific situations in more languages than their mother tongues (first languages).

In order to make this happen, it is important

- That HEIs and representatives of the world of work establish ongoing dialogue and collaboration in order to determine what skills and competences are in demand now and likely to be demand in the future.
- That HEIs programmes and course offering should be designed in line with the outcomes of such consultations, so that their graduates are able to meet the demands of the global labour market.
- That HE students are aware of the fact that they need foreign language and intercultural communication skills and competences, and that they act on it.
- That language and intercultural communication courses are made available to students, preferably as part of the curriculum, and that these courses are designed in a lifelong learning perspective.
- That students learn to learn languages so that they are able and willing to continue learning process after they graduate.
- That European and national authorities make this possible also, but not only, by providing sufficient resources.

At the European conference these issues will be presented and discussed by representatives from European and national authorities, from the world of work, and from the Higher Education sector.

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