

European Civil Society embraces Multilingualism

**National Languages
in
Higher Education, Science & Technology**

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Report on Cyprus

1. Language use in public & private higher education institutions in Cyprus

The situation in higher education in Cyprus as far as language use is concerned is quite clear: public higher education¹ is overwhelmingly in Greek, whereas private higher education is overwhelmingly in English². This pattern follows up from secondary education (first and second cycle) where most of private education is in English (62% in English, 15% in Greek, the rest in Russian, Arabic, or French) and all of public education in Greek.

Despite the fact that some academics feel that having Greek as language of instruction impedes the development and growth of public universities both quantitatively (numbers of students) and qualitatively (choice of academics), the use of English in academic curricula and programmes remains to date quite limited. At Open University 4 only out of 16 postgraduate programmes are offered in English³; at the Technological University 2 out of 19 postgraduate courses are taught in English⁴; and finally, at the University of Cyprus, 3 out of 74 postgraduate programmes are also offered in English⁵. No programmes at a graduate level whatsoever are taught in English (at the exception of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Cyprus where courses are taking place in English). On the other hand, private universities offer most of their graduate and postgraduate courses in English: at Frederic University there are no courses in Greek; at the European University among 45 graduate and 14 postgraduate courses, 9 graduate and 9 postgraduate programmes are in Greek; at the University of Nicosia 6 out of 33 graduate programmes and 2 out of 3 post-graduate programmes are taught in Greek; at the University of Neapolis, 1 out of 6 graduate

¹ There are three public universities: University of Cyprus (www.ucy.ac.cy); Technological University of Cyprus (www.cut.ac.cy); Open University (www.ouc.ac.cy).

² There are five private universities: Frederick University (www.frederick.ac.cy); European University (www.euc.ac.cy); University of Nicosia (www.unic.ac.cy); Neapolis University (www.nup.ac.cy); University of Central Lancashire – Cyprus (www.uclancypus.ac.cy).

³ (a) Educational leadership in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, (b) Theory of education & curriculum development, (c) Information & communication systems (d) Applied health informatics in the Faculty of Pure & Applied Sciences, (d) Business management in the Faculty of Economics and Management (and in Greek).

⁴ These two courses –an MSc and PhD in environmental Health and a MSc in Epidemiology & Biostatistics– are offered by the International Institute of Cyprus in collaboration with the University of Harvard.

⁵ (a) Financial Economics.

programmes is in Greek⁶; finally, at the University of Central Lancashire – Cyprus, all the programmes are taught in English⁷. We should, however, mention at this point that private institutions have the legal obligation to teach Greek to their students attending courses in English, an obligation that was set by the House of Parliament with law 143/1989 (Karyolemou 2001). It is worth also noting that most of the programmes offered in Greek in private institutions are in education, law and paramedical professions.

It is clear from the above that today English predominates as the language of private education (all levels) whereas Greek predominates in public education (all levels). It is also clear that diachronically, English has extended its sphere of influence in the educational domain also *downwardly* with the creation of elementary and nursery schools where it is used as the medium of instruction, thus now covering the whole age-range of schooling (Karyolemou 2010)

However, it would also be useful to consider if there have been any changes in the language teaching policy of universities throughout the years. A diachronic approach is difficult to adopt for public universities, funded relatively recently, the University of Cyprus being the oldest in the list: it was created in 1992, followed by the Open University in 2002 and the Technological University of Cyprus in 2004. At the opposite, private universities were established –in their initial form of higher education institutions (Colleges)– several decades ago. A brief overview of language use in the graduate and postgraduate programmes over the years confirms that:

- (a) Private universities are consistently using English as their primary language of instruction over the years.
- (b) Public universities are consistently using Greek as their primary language of instruction over the years.

However, we do note some recent trends:

- (a) Private universities have been gradually introducing courses in Greek over the past 4-5 years as a response to the increased number of Cypriot and Greek students who are now interested in private education. A decisive step that can partly explain this new interest for private institutions is their recognition by the Cypriot government, after a long-lasting debate that begun in the 80s and continued well into the 2000s, and the accreditation of their programmes as university level programmes. Private universities which had most of their students coming from English speaking countries outside Europe (India, Pakistan, Arab Emirates etc.), had to respond to this new interest, taking at the same time into consideration the low degree of competence in academic English which prevented many local students from enrolling in the already existing programmes.
- (b) Public universities have been gradually introducing courses in English. In many European universities, the introduction of English taught curricula is part of the internationalization of education and the need for national universities to compete in the global market. In the case of public universities in Cyprus, however, the introduction of English was not the outcome of pressures exerted by international

⁶ LLB in law.

⁷ These numbers might have slightly changed as new programmes which were under consideration might have been introduced in the meanwhile.

students whose number remains extremely low still today. Here again, what seems to have played an important role in the decision to introduce English taught programmes in public universities is local rather than global demand.

Even though the above mentioned trends of policy in language use in private and public universities are exactly opposite, they are motivated by the same economic considerations: recover a part of the internal market they were regularly losing because of the language of instruction they were using. The new policy seems to be more easily implemented in private universities where the decision making process is not encumbered by legal restrictions or the need for external authorization. At the opposite, public universities which are legally bounded to the use of Greek as a language of instruction, had to negotiate their new policy in order to get the consent of public authorities and the approval of the House of Parliament: when the University of Cyprus introduced its first postgraduate course in English –an MBA– it was publicly decried and had to turn to the Parliament to convince it to amend the law and admit the possibility of using a language of instruction other than Greek in some postgraduate programmes, as long as the same programmes were also offered in Greek (Karyolemou 2004, 2010). This possibility was included in the founding law of public universities created since then.

2. From the point of view of academics & researchers

As in many other European countries, English is a working language for most academics since the most notorious journals/books and the most recent information on various subjects are published in English, English is the language used in most conferences, research networks etc. A corollary of this situation is that academic evaluation is done on the basis of academics' ability to publish their work in international journals and participate in scientific fora or networks where the use of English is predominant. Publications in the native language are downgraded as they are not considered sufficient evidence of the capacity of a researcher to be productive and actively contributing to their area of research/expertise; how much more if this language is also a small language. Often times, small languages/communities do not offer scientific publications in all areas of research and knowledge: in Cyprus, for instance, there are very few academic journals confined in specific areas of research, whereas local publishing houses are poorly developed. This situation is especially problematic for those academics who work in public education institutions as they are asked to make twice as much effort since the language they use to teach and their research and publication language are different. An additional problem is the lack of basic introductory material in many areas of knowledge. Where such material exists, there is only a limited choice; as a consequence, very often academics need to prepare and distribute their own extensive notes in their area of expertise/teaching. Sometimes, one cannot avoid turning to the already existing bibliography in English even when teaching graduate courses.

3. From the point of view of students

From the point of view of students, this situation entails a series of problems that range from mild to serious. The absence of basic bibliographic material in Greek –at the exception of specific areas of knowledge, e.g. History, Literature etc.– and the use of textbooks or basic material in English creates a series of problems. Most students have, of course, already

studied English in primary and secondary school for more than eight years and it is generally admitted that youngsters are nowadays more familiarized with English than ever before because of its intensive use through the internet. However, their command of academic or scientific English which is the kind of language required at this level of studies is, for the most, quite poor. The use of material in English requires additional effort on their behalf in order not only to be able to read and understand the texts but also to constructively use the knowledge/information provided to meet the exigencies of the programme they attend. Consequently, the vast majority of students are reluctant/unable to read any scientific/academic text in a language other than Greek. As they are unable to retrieve the necessary information from texts in English to nourish their thoughts, quite often they are not in a position to express an informed opinion on a specific issue/subject/area. More importantly, their lack of competence in English impedes their capacity to critically read the texts, leading them to a mere reproduction of opinions expressed by others without any personal reflexion or contribution.

4. Elements for discussion ...

Despite the progress of English in the educational system over the past decades, there are several factors that seem to slow down its progress and hold it back from becoming the only language of instruction in higher education:

- (a) The strong ideological link between language and identity that strengthens the function of a language as an identity marker and make it harder to be replaced.
- (b) The existence of constitutional or legal provisions regulating language use in public universities that cannot be easily bypassed.
- (c) The pressures exerted by the local market that point to an adjustment of language policies –introduction of courses in Greek in private institutions and of English in public institutions– in order to satisfy the needs and demands locally.

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