

Languages Policy and Policy Actions at the European Technical University of Darmstadt: Putting Functional Multilingualism into Practice

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Preliminary remarks

People with diverse biographical backgrounds and languages skills, learn, teach, work, and interact at the Technical University of Darmstadt. We see this diversity as an opportunity that can benefit teaching, research, administrative work, and cooperation with partners. TU Darmstadt conceives of itself as a European institution with a global reach and grasps internationalisation as a “dynamic process” (The President of TU Darmstadt 2020, p. 77). Internationalisation is relevant for all areas of the university and encompasses the promotion of cosmopolitanism, diversity, democracy, and sustainability.

Introducing and delivering functional multilingualism realises, fosters, and lends visibility to this diversity by embedding it as the university’s language policy which again is an integral part of the internationalisation strategy. Based on the university’s internationalisation strategy (President of TU Darmstadt 2020), TU Darmstadt has developed a languages policy that sets out the theoretical, political, and education policy principles underlying the university’s approach and includes a catalogue of action items (see below) for the practical delivery of the policy. Among other sources, this policy takes up recommendations made by the German Rectors’ Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz 2019) and by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat 2018; for an overview of developments in language policy in higher education in Germany, see also Hettiger 2019). The functional multilingualism envisaged in the languages policy will be materially realised by delivering the defined action items. These all proceed from the fundamental assumption that all our social interactions are mediated via language. Essential questions arise in this context: How can successful communication be ensured on an international campus? How can we use the linguistic resources of every member of our university in ways that benefit everybody? And how can we contribute to nurturing and developing them further?

We communicate using every means of linguistic expression available to us

Functional multilingualism at TU Darmstadt expressly encompasses all the languages used in the context of our university. This means that functional multilingualism extends beyond using only German and English: it incorporates the use of German and varieties of German as surrounding languages and the use of English and varieties of English as international languages of communication, but it also involves the use of other languages of scholarship, foreign languages, first and second languages, heritage languages, and sign languages. German, as the predominant surrounding language, plays an important and special role at TU Darmstadt. Most of our students, teachers, and staff members have German as their first language. This is relevant because most people can express themselves with the greatest precision through the medium of their first language(s) and because it should currently be assumed that German is the primary language of communication at a German university. Promoting the learning and acquisition of German serves not least to foster the integration of international students and (visiting) researchers and contributes significantly to academic, research, and teaching success.

Functional multilingualism means that languages are selected and used based on their suitability for meeting the demands that arise in specific situations, contexts, discourses, and interactions. This

enables agile, dynamic, and adaptable linguistic interactions (cf. Bradlaw/Hufeisen/Nölle-Becker in print).

TU Darmstadt's languages policy and the accompanying catalogue of policy actions take up this dynamism by reacting sensitively with continual adaptations and refinements to changes at the university and in the wider context. The **theoretical fundament** of the languages policy is supplied by models of multilingualism and multiple language acquisition (including Herdina and Jessner's dynamic model, Hufeisen's factor model, and Berthel's neurolinguistic model) that describe how people can learn and process multiple languages and use them both receptively and productively. Having language action competence in multiple languages is the norm globally and a standard that TU Darmstadt also aspires to. In this context, we understand switching readily between languages (code switching/code mixing/code meshing/translanguaging) to be a useful and usual form of language action with applications in the everyday multilingual realities of teaching, research, work, and life on our campus – just as language mediation also bridges gaps between two or more languages.

Multilingualism is an expression of diversity and democracy.

In **political** terms, the university's functional multilingualism languages policy champions the **European** target of L1+2 (the acquisition of language action competence in one's first language(s) and at least two additional languages) and is anchored in a **democratic** conception that holds all languages to be equally important and valuable. This includes minority languages and heritage languages as well as varieties of standard languages (such as dialects or regiolects). It also encompasses the inclusion of all discourse participants, for instance by means of sign languages, and thus facilitates justice and diversity. It follows that crossover exists between the languages policy and other sub-strategies that are in place at TU Darmstadt, for instance the communication, diversity and sustainability strategies or the principles for studying and teaching.

The policy of functional multilingualism lays down groundwork for creating an atmosphere in which all members of the university are met with **esteem** and **unprejudiced regard** as they live through their languages and use them **multimodally** in discourse. This expressly includes language use with electronic support – while also recognising that the comprehensive assistance with practice tasks or repetitive work provided by tools like language learning software or machine translation packages cannot replace humans as discourse partners when semantic or pragmatic questions are at stake or differentiated discourse is required.

The policy of functional multilingualism expressly includes the fostering of intercultural competences to facilitate intercultural communication that makes people feel valued. This includes the communication of (hidden) cultural concepts and semantic meanings that are transported via idiomatic language and should be taught to learners of foreign languages.

Multilingualism is more than German and English

The functional multilingualism languages policy at TU Darmstadt pursues several goals in the realm of **educational policy**: although German and English will presumably be the main languages of communication at our university for the foreseeable future – in purely quantitative terms – and their use will be supported with appropriate provision, enabling access to and the use of other languages will also be prioritised and facilitated. This applies, especially, to languages that are needed in our university alliances, cooperation projects with research and industry, and other partnerships. The languages policy does not subscribe to the dubious hypothesis (unsupported by research) that German is a “difficult” language and English an “easy” language.

It differentiates difficulty, instead, with reference to the contexts of specific language actions and the goals pursued: basic oral skills may suffice for informal discourse, but to express exactly what is meant with precision in scholarly discourse, appropriately specialised language must be used – and used at a very high level. In this light, the languages policy emphasises the importance of acquiring language competences that suffice to meet the requirements applicable in specific situations; further details are given in the action items catalogue. Examples for forms of provision catering to highly specific requirements include (discipline-specific) language courses anchored in programme curricula and specialist language courses for university administrative staff. Acquiring skills in the German language is considered necessary even for students enrolled on English-language degree programmes to ensure that these students are socially integrated during their time in Germany and gain language skills valued by both the German labour market and the labour markets of their respective home countries.

Concluding remarks

The languages policy at TU Darmstadt supports all members of the university – in teaching, research, and the university administration – with using and enhancing their language skills to ensure successful multilingual communication. Functional use of languages in their specific contexts allows all involved, whether their backgrounds are regional, European, or international, to participate actively in the life of the university and feel that they are valued members of the university community.

References:

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Catalogue of languages policy action items – multilingual and plurilingual¹, fair and democratic, sustainable and dynamic
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| What? | Actions? | Target groups | Internationalisation strategy (=int str. ²) links | Frequency? ³ |
|---|---|--------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Time frame: For short-term delivery | | | | |
| Name the languages in which one has language action competence, and which can facilitate mutual understanding | Multilingual e-mail signatures, information on stickers or badges, labels for reception desks and events like trade fairs, and nameplates for office tables | All members and visitors | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: visibility) | C |
| Show language diversity at events | (Sustainable) buttons with languages information, signage in several languages | All | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: visibility) | R |
| Produce an information brochure on functional multilingualism for internal use at TU Darmstadt | Information and awareness raising, high priority | All staff | Int str. p. 74, p. 80 (Goal: information) | O |
| Establish coffee breaks for students, research associates, and visitors: The role of multilingualism | Information and awareness raising | All | Int str. p. 74, p. 80 (Goal: information) | C |

¹ Plurilingual = individuals; multilingual = societies and institutions

² As part of the overall strategy of TU Darmstadt (The President of Technische Universität Darmstadt 2020; adopted by the Senate on 19 May, 2021)

³ Frequency: once-off (O)| recurring (R)| continuous (C)

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|---|--|---|---|---|
| Evaluation of digital language learning provision, definition of possible uses for improving language competences, modification of SPZ provision as applicable | | All staff | Int str. p.71, p. 75 | C |
| Release publications of the TU Darmstadt Executive Board bilingually (German/English) or multilingually (for instance, with some sections in languages other than German and English) | For example, coffee-table books as gifts for visitors | All, visitors, or cooperating institutions | Int str. p. 80 (Goal: successful communication) | C |
| Time frame: For medium-term delivery | | | | |
| Improve language action competences in English | Make (specialised) language provision in English available | All | Int str. p.71, p. 75 (Goal: successful communication) | C |
| English for Administration (Participation in language courses counts as working time dedicated to continuing professional development) | Advertise “English for Administration” course | All research administration staff | Int str. p. 80 (Goal: successful communication) | C |
| Develop and establish English as a second committee language | Specific provision | All involved in committees | Int str. pp. 74– 80 (Goal: successful communication) | C |
| Foster and professionalise competences in German as a foreign language | DaF provision for: | incoming students, visiting students, non-German speaking students, teaching staff, researchers | Int str. p. 72, p. 79 (increasing the academic success of non-German-speaking students, researchers or doctoral candidates, weakness 2) (Goal: increase | C |

| | | | | |
|--|--|-------------------|--|---|
| | | | academic success/inclusion) | |
| Foster and professionalise language action competences in German as a second language | DaZ provision | Heritage speakers | Int str. p. 80 (Goal: increase academic success/inclusion) | C |
| Foster and professionalise language action competences in all Unite! Languages | Languages provision within Unite! (Meta campus) | All | Int str. p. 71 (Goal: communication/more successful cooperation) | C |
| Foster and professionalise language action competences in the languages of partner universities | Languages provision | All | Int str. p. 71 (Goal: communication/more successful cooperation) | C |
| Support maintenance of heritage language(s) to foster linguistic and intercultural competences | Provision in as many different heritage languages as possible to meet demand | Heritage speakers | Int str. p. 71 (Goal: increase academic success/successful communication) | C |
| Foster and professionalise (scholarly/specialist) text competences in first, second, and foreign languages | Provision in German as a first/foreign/second language, English, French | All | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: Increase academic success) | C |

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|---|--|-----------------------|--|---|
| Establish and develop a centre for digital language learning | Professionalisation, training | All | Int str. p.71, p. 75 (Goal: successful communication) | C |
| Micro-credentials – linguistic and intercultural competences (also within the framework of Unite!) | Training/professional development (certificates), skills development | All (students, staff) | Int str. p. 71 (Goal: increase academic success/successful communication) | C |
| Increase intercultural awareness of TU members and international visitors | Workshops, certificate | All | Int str. p. 80, p. 82 (Goal: understanding /navigating diversity) | C |
| Discipline-specific bilingualism and multilingualism on the web pages of individual departments, directorates etc. | Translations | All | Int str. pp. 77–79 (Communication strategy) (Goal: visibility, communication) | R |
| Participate annually in the International Day of Languages (marked by the Council of Europe on 26 September since 2001) | Activities that illustrate lived multilingualism at TU Darmstadt | All | Int str. p. 77 (core vision 1) (Goal: visibility, inclusion) | R |
| Provide workshops for Ingenium: Using multilingualism for research | Raising awareness, training multipliers | Doctoral students | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: increase academic success) | R |

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|---|--|--------------------|---|-----|
| Workshops by/with HDA: Cross-language university teaching/didactics/CLIL | Training | All teaching staff | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: Increase academic success) | R |
| Provide workshops within the Unite! Teaching and Learning Activities (TLA) | Training | All teaching staff | Int str. p. 79 (Goal: increase academic success) | R |
| Introduce languages-themed weeks with dining hall catering to match (e.g. "Indian Week") | Specialist lectures; lecture series with a language focus; different departments give a lecture in a selected language, matching meals | All | Int str. p. 77 (core vision 1) (Goal: visibility, inclusion) | R |
| How many languages does TU Darmstadt speak? (Conduct survey, special focus on: "Which languages can I read/write/understand/use to communicate?") | Annual survey of language diversity at the TU (supported by research) | All | Int str. p. 77 (core vision 1) (Goal: visibility, inclusion) | R |
| Create multilingual dictionary for common terms in the university context (in Unite! languages) | Currently being drafted: German-English glossary | All | Int str. p. 80 (Goal: communication) | R |
| Install multilingual signs (using more languages than German and English) (for new projects) | Audit icons for clarity and intercultural sensitivity; language diversity | All | Int str. p. 80 (Goal: communication /visibility) | O/C |

| Time frame: For long-term delivery | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|---|---|
| Conduct accompanying research (e.g., how does functional multilingualism work? Is change happening? If so, what is happening and how? If not, why not?) Conduct major and minor projects (with internal/external funding) ranging from seminar activities and projects up to doctoral/habilitation dissertations | Research | Academic departments | Int str. p. 79, p. 83 (Goal: legitimacy/visibility/impact research) | C |
| Hold discipline-specific discussions on the role of languages at events organised and hosted by TU Darmstadt | Discussions: The language of my discipline in German, the language of my discipline for schools, does English really cover all communicative needs? | Academic departments | Int str. p. 80 (Goals: participation, reflection, transfer, responsibility for subsequent generations) | R |
| Publish relevant research results and reports on the experiences of (incoming and outgoing) visiting researchers | Research and writing | FG/academic departments | Int str. p. 79, p. 83 (Goal: legitimacy/visibility/impact research) | C |
| <i>Optional: Create an incentive system for completing action item programmes</i> | | | | |

This policy actions catalogue is dynamic. It is continually evaluated and developed further to meet the demands of changing circumstances. Questions that could be relevant for developing further actions include:

- Opportunities to motivate students and groups of students, for instance within contexts such as the “Deutschlandstipendium” national scholarship programme?
- Potential to involve alumni and start-ups and the links with them to advance functional multilingualism?
- Possibilities to audit links to schools to look at functional multilingualism, implications for teacher training (ZfL), links to the Foreigners'

Registration Office?

- Chances to foster functional multilingualism in the context of integrating refugees: teacher training, cooperation with the “Bürgerstiftung” foundation and other regional institutions?