



The Wulkow
Group

Memorandum

**The Wulkow Memorandum on
Politics and Language Centres in
Higher Education**

INTRODUCTION

In January 2018 Language Centre directors from 11 countries met to mark the 10th meeting of the Wulkow Group.

The Wulkow Group was founded in January 2008 by Dr. Thomas Vogel, Director of the Language Centre at the Europa Viadrina University in Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany. The purpose of the group is to bring together directors of Language Centres to exchange ideas and best practices but above all to promote quality in teaching and management across Europe and beyond.

The title of the 10th meeting: “Language Teaching in Higher Education in Dangerous Times - the Role of the Wulkow Network”, reflected the concerns amongst language professionals about certain ongoing political developments across Europe and beyond.

Some political and social changes in countries can both directly and indirectly impact the work of Language Centres. If certain political changes are widely interpreted as negative, these countries can be seen as less welcoming, less open to immigration, and thus perceived as developing a more closed, nationalistic stance.

If these countries then experience a drop-in student or work exchanges, and are considered less attractive for future employment possibilities, this, in turn, could have a direct effect on the number of students studying languages.

Furthermore, any subsequent reduction in student mobility can further question both the immediate need for and the future role of language learning. This may result in a more restricted mindset and a future redefined by both conceptual and real borders.

However, if concerns have been raised about a possible fall in the learning of languages other than English, then a by-product of the rising number of refugees and asylum seekers in particular has seen a sharp rise in the need for effective language courses to help them settle and integrate into the societies of their adopted countries. German as a Foreign Language provision, as a case in point, has expanded to cope with this growth, and Language Centres have played a key role in helping communities to cope with this situation.

Language Centres are multilingual and multicultural environments. Both staff and students from a range of countries interact successfully on a daily basis. As a community they reflect on and learn about intercultural skills as a matter of course.

However, Language Centres do not exist in isolation from the rest of the higher education institution, and the latter in turn cannot isolate itself from political developments whether on national or international level.

Language Centres are safe places to discuss those issues which deal with the power of language itself e.g. the way that words such as “global”, “European” and “immigrant” can move from the positive or neutral, to the negative and emotive.

QUESTIONS FOR THE LANGUAGE CENTRES

The questions for Language Centres are therefore both simple and complex:

- How can Language Centres address a political climate which has practical implications for the uptake, retention and range of languages on offer?
- How can Language Centres address the wider issues in society caused by shifts in political climates?

During the Wulkow meeting a discussion group addressed these questions. Some issues were more challenging than others, particularly as institutions of higher education, in some countries, must observe strict rules of neutrality when dealing with external politics. It was clear however that certain issues were of concern for the whole range of the political spectrum, and Language Centres are able to address these in ways that are beneficial for all parties.

KEY POINTS OF THE 10TH WULKOW MEETING

- Language Centres are able to help with social cohesion.
- Language Centres address linguistic and intercultural divisions.
- Language Centres operate at local, national and international level.
- Language Centres foster intercultural exchange between home and visiting students and staff on campus.
- Language Centres also work with the wider community to enhance awareness of the importance of all languages.
- Language Centres acknowledge the benefits of multilingual and multicultural identities.
- Language Centres promote communication both within and beyond borders and help create the effective communicators of the future.
- Language Centres involve learners in topics which help to heal rifts in society, and promote language learning itself and foster intercultural sensitivity as a way of bringing people together.
- Language Centres are enablers and equip students with interpersonal and communication skills.
- Language Centres teach languages to empower people, to enable them to exist and work alongside all members of any community.
- Language Centres are inclusive. To conclude, Language Centres are placed at the heart of higher education institutions. They have at their core a clear role - language teaching and learning. However, their focus is also on the direct use and applicable benefits of languages. Language Centres have long since balanced the theoretical with the practical, the academic with applicable - they are also sensitive to change.

- This awareness of and sensitivity to societal changes, coupled with a commitment to making multilingualism work, has resulted in a flexible mindset amongst its workforce, with the aims of social cohesion and intercultural communication being both desirable and achievable.

Wulkow, Germany, January 2018

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Meet the Wulkow Group on Youtube:

Wulkow Talks