Languages Connect: What does Ireland's first government strategy for foreign-languages-in-education mean for Irish universities?

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1. Background and context

The most cursory of reviews of the linguistic profile of Ireland reveals that a foreign-languages-in-education strategy was sorely needed. On the one hand, Ireland enjoys a rich tradition of bilingualism with both English and Irish taught within the education system. However, since the discontinuation of the _Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative_ in December 2011, after fourteen years in existence, there has been no mainstream provision of foreign language education in either the pre-school or primary school sectors.

The uptake of languages in secondary schools is strong. However, it is limited to a small range of languages, in particular French which accounts for more than half of students taking a language at second level. The other languages are German, Italian and Spanish in the junior cycle, with the addition of Arabic, Japanese and Russian in the senior cycle. A foreign language is not compulsory for the Leaving Certificate with approximately 30% of school leavers completing their education without a foreign language in their final qualification and 10% completing the junior cycle without a qualification in a foreign language (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2017a, 17).

It is in the Higher Education sector that deficiencies within the Irish education system in relation to foreign languages become particularly apparent. While approximately 70% of school leavers have a Leaving Certificate qualification in a foreign language, only four percent of university students (Languages Connect references some 9,000 students in 2012/13), are engaged in the study of a foreign language at third level, either as part of a specialist language degree, combined with another discipline or as an accredited element of another programme (DES 2017a, 31). The Strategy notes that approximately 6,000 of these students are in universities and 3,000 in Institutes of Technology.

It is therefore unsurprising that foreign language capacity among the Irish population is below the EU average. For example, survey data gathered by EU institutions between 2016 and 2018 indicates that approximately 20% of Irish adults report that they can conduct a conversation in a foreign language compared with an EU average of approximately 35% (Eurostat 2018). In addition, successive reports and studies from both industry and academia indicate that a lack of foreign language capacity in Ireland is impacting negatively on the country's social, cultural and economic development. Examples of the former include the report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, _Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally_ (Forfás 2012); _The National Employer Survey_ (Higher Education Authority (HEA), Solas, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2015) and _Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025_ (DES 2016) to name but a few of the most relevant and recent. Academic studies reaching similar conclusions regarding the value of foreign language learning in social, cultural and psychological contexts are also numerous and include Bruen 2013; Cook 2016; Fielding 2016; Kirwan, 2016 and Okal 2014).

2. Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-26 – proposals, possibilities and challenges

Against this backdrop, the Department of Education and Skills launched an extensive public consultation process in 2014. A number of publications informed this approach. These included *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum* (Little, 2003), *Language Education Policy Profile Ireland* (Department of Education and Science, and the Council of Europe 2008), the *National Language Strategy* (Royal Irish Academy, 2011) and the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Hunt 2011). The output from this process was *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* and its associated *Implementation Plan.* The strategy's stated mission is:

> "…*that Ireland's education system will promote a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted, because of its inherent value for individuals, society and the economy*". (DES 2017a, pp.7).

Languages Connect sets out an ambitious range of objectives and targets intended to assist the Irish education system in achieving this aim. These relate to all areas of the education system from pre-school to lifelong learning. They centre on the following four overarching Goals (DES 2017a, 8):

1. Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging language learning environment
2. Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish
3. Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages
4. Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages

A particular strength of the strategy is that it recognises the importance of understanding and harnessing the '*complex interdependencies*' (DES 2017a: 8) that exist between the different elements of the education system in particular primary, secondary and third level. The strategy acknowledges the 'push and pull' factors that exist, with each sector dependent on the other for the success of proposed measures, and the education sectors dependent in turn on the success of broader measures relating to awareness raising and a change in mind-set in relation to languages among the wider public.

Having considered all of the many proposed actions within *Languages Connect,* this paper selects five stated target outcomes that are likely to significantly impact the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The paper describes each of the five target outcomes in turn, considers the scope for positive action they imply and discusses potential associated challenges. Table 1, below, sets out the selected five target outcomes from *Languages Connect*:

	Languages Connect Target Outcome
1	Increase numbers studying a foreign language at third level, in any capacity
2	Mandate independent, external certification of language teacher competency

3	Increase student mobility by 50%, via Erasmus+
4	Incentivise the study of languages for Leaving Certificate using CAO bonus points
5	University publication of institutional language strategies

Table 1: Selected target outcomes from *Languages Connect* Strategy

2.1 Increase numbers studying a foreign language at third level, in any capacity

The Strategy provides a target outcome for the proportion of students in Higher Education studying a language 'in any capacity' (DES 2017a, 19) to increase from 4% to 20% by 2026.

	Baseline 2016	Mid-term target 2022	End target 2026
Percentage of students studying courses with a language component in HE	4% (2012/13)	10%	20%

Table 2: Numbers studying languages (*Languages Connect*, pp. 33) as part of their degree.

The call for an increase in the numbers studying foreign languages in Higher Education is particularly welcome in light of the previously described linguistic profile of Ireland. The target outcome is, nonetheless, dramatic. The reference to study 'in any capacity' means that all of the following categories are relevant:

1. Those studying specialist language degrees
2. Those studying language alongside another discipline with both given equal or near equal weighting
3. Those studying a foreign language as part of an Institution Wide Language Program (IWLP) or equivalent in parallel with their primary degree, and
4. Those studying a foreign language in a more informal setting which is not for credit.

Notwithstanding, the phrase "courses with a language component" (table 2) suggests that categories 1-3, above, are likely to dominate. The balance between these different forms of language study is not specified within the plan and remains at the discretion of Higher Education Institutions.

On the positive side, if the actions proposed in *Languages Connect* relating to pre-school, primary and secondary level are successful, and the proposed awareness raising campaign among the wider public achieves its objectives, HEIs should see an increase in the level of demand for foreign languages at third level. Such an increase in demand would facilitate universities to increase the numbers of places available on specialist language degrees and on degrees where language is a core component alongside another discipline, without seeing a drop in the standard of applicants (as might be reflected, for example, in Central Applications Office (CAO) points for university entry). An increase in demand would strengthen the case

for expanding such programmes as well as for the development of new programmes in foreign languages. New programmes would be characterised by a diversification of the languages on offer as called for by the strategy, as well as by a diversification of the other disciplines with which these languages are combined.

However, if the actions proposed for second level are not taken or do not have the desired outcomes, there may not be an increase in demand to study languages at university. If there is no increase in demand and universities are, nonetheless, required to increase the number of students studying languages to 20% of the student body, they may come under pressure to drop standards, as reflected for example in the CAO cut-off points for degree programmes, in order to increase numbers. In other words, an oversupply of places on degree programmes featuring languages could lead to a fall in the CAO points required for these degrees. Such an approach could result in students on foreign language degrees reaching lower levels of proficiency on average over the course of their programme than is currently the case. A possible impact of this would be failure on the part of some language graduates to reach the standards laid out for registration as foreign language teachers by the Teaching Council (see section 2.2) despite completion of a programme in which a foreign language is a core component. It could also result in higher failure rates on foreign language degrees, an outcome that would hinder attempts to counter the perception that languages are difficult (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2015: 34-35). In other words, increasing the proportion of students studying foreign languages at third level without negatively impacting the proficiency levels achieved on average by these students is dependent on an increase in demand for places on foreign language degree programmes.

Institution Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs), as they are known, are less dependent on demand for places for degrees on which language represents a core component. IWLPs represent a means of introducing a relatively small foreign language element to an institution's portfolio of programs in other disciplines. Organisationally, they can stand alone outside of a language department. Alternatively they can be integrated into language schools and departments and administered alongside specialist language degrees. Students on IWLPs take a limited number of credits - sometimes as few as five - in a foreign language, in addition to or as an option on their discipline-specific programme of study. IWLPs have many benefits as well as bringing with them their own complexities. Funding models very: some are funded by requiring students to pay fees in addition to their primary degree programmes. The Cambridge University Language Programme (CULP)[1] is an example of this model, offering Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili and Turkish to Cambridge University students and staff as well as to the general public. Other IWLPs are funded by HEIs themselves. This brings us back to the observation made by *Languages Connect* that the achievement of its goals will require time, commitment and additional resources (DES 2017, 12). The resourcing and administration of IWLPs can be challenging. However, a successful IWLP can bring many benefits, exposing a broad range of students to the study of foreign language and often increasing the uptake of ERASMUS and other study abroad placements, a further objective of the strategy discussed in section 2.3, below. While students registered on IWLPs may not attain the language proficiency levels equivalent to specialist language students, the development of intercultural competencies, cognitive flexibility and other transferable skills associated with language learning, can be substantial. These are beneficial to employers and to society as a whole (Bruen and Sherry 2007; Dlaska 2000; González-Becerra, 2017). Additionally, an IWLP can be conceptualised as a stand-alone set of

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[1] http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/lc/culp/culp-index.html

language modules open to all, or as a tailored set of modules developed in close collaboration with another degree programme. While both approaches are used internationally, experience and research into best practice would appear to indicate that the latter has a greater chance of long-term success particularly in relation to the achievement of relatively higher levels of proficiency albeit with heavier resource implications (Saarinen and Taalas, 2017).

Finally, good use of informal language learning settings can also be extremely supportive of linguistic and intercultural learning. Examples include learning spaces in which students from diverse linguistic backgrounds are encouraged to socialise and interact during semi-structured activities and events. The challenge here is to avoid an impression that that they are an 'easy option' in terms of achieving government targets with a minimum of resourcing and support.

To conclude, while not an either/or situation, specialist language degrees and degrees on which languages are a core component are particularly reliant on student demand for their success. The success of IWLPs and informal language learning, on the other hand, depends to a greater extent on adequate funding and organisational excellence on the part of the HEI.

2.2   External Certification of Language Teachers' language proficiency

This proposal involves the setting and independent certification of minimum levels of language proficiency for student entry both to Professional Masters in Education (PME) programmes and to the teaching profession. Table 3, below, replicates the Actions put forward in *Languages Connect* (DES 2017a, 8).

Action	Timescale	Lead
Minimum CEFR level for entry to post-primary PME programmes	Q3 2018	Teaching Council
For registration with the Teaching Council, language teachers to be required to provide, in addition to their university degree, independent evidence of competence at minimum of CEFR level B2.2 in all five language skills	Q4 2020	Teaching Council

Table 3: Minimum proficiency requirements for entry to PME programmes and to the Teaching profession

Of note are the differences in timescale and the fact that the minimum proficiency level required for entry to post-primary PME courses does not appear to require independent certification. This proposal provides scope for positive action on the part of HEIs, to ensure that undergraduates reach the required proficiency levels, at present a B2.2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) in all five language skills, that is: listening, reading, spoken production, spoken interaction and writing. This is an ambitious requirement particularly in relation to the productive skills which include writing, spoken production and spoken interaction. However its achievement supports the argument frequently put forward by HEI foreign language education departments for improved lecturer-student ratios, increased contact hours and enhanced infrastructure to support blended foreign language learning. An appropriate and well-designed independent proficiency examination could also, by means of the well documented

assessment backwash effect (see for example Paker 2013; Watkins, Dahlin and Ekholm 2005), have a constructive influence on the design of third level language curricula.

Additional minimum proficiency level requirements may also pose challenges, including the potential creation of additional barriers to entry to PME courses and for teacher registration. This may lead to reduced demand for places in foreign languages at third level, countering many of the other objectives contained within *Languages Connect*. In particular, the requirement to attain B2.2. in all five language skills in order to register as a teacher could introduce uncertainty and anxiety at a late stage in a graduate's education path.

2.3   Increase student mobility and its impact

There is a strong focus within *Languages Connect* on outward mobility from Ireland and its impact. This concerns both an increase in the numbers studying and working abroad through a foreign language and an increase in the proficiency levels they obtain. Included in the broader goal is an increase in the numbers studying abroad, even where they do not do so through the medium of a foreign language. Table 4 replicates the key targets from *Languages Connect*.

	Baseline 2016	2022	2026
Participation in Erasmus+ in HE and other study and work placements abroad	3, 314	4,400	5,400
Improvements in returning CEFR levels of Erasmus students	63% at level B2 or above	68%	75%

Table 4: Mobility increases and language proficiency impact

The Strategy recommends several measures to increase the impact of time spent abroad on language proficiency levels. Many of these align with best practice and with what university language departments already do, in parallel with mainstream activities. Some of these are primarily intended to encourage more students to study/work abroad, and many of them specifically to study/work abroad through the target language.

They include:

1. Awareness raising exercises, on the value of the languages being studied
2. Engagement between pre- and post-Erasmus students
3. Promotion of immersion experiences by students while studying or working abroad
4. Provision of more information in various formats on ERASMUS+ for potential ERASMUS+ students
5. Acknowledgement in students' degree of the time spent abroad and
6. Exploration of the possibility of school or work placements abroad in the context of the new concurrent teaching degrees

Other suggested measures are intended to support increases in foreign language proficiency among those studying abroad through a target foreign language, such as:

1. Increased use of ICT and media tools to enable feedback from sending institutions
2. Collection and dissemination of best practice examples for the use of ICT supports to enhance and support mobility periods abroad

Many university language departments are already engaging in at least some these activities, albeit often in a somewhat ad-hoc and unsupported manner, therefore the strategy recommendations provide scope for enhanced support and mainstreaming within HEIs. There is also scope to look in more depth at ways of assisting students to develop their proficiency while abroad, an area touched upon but covered in less depth in the strategy.

Potential challenges faced by language education departments in relation to the above measures concern the often overlooked administrative load and logistical challenges associated with the organisation of study and work abroad for students. There is also a danger that in the context of institutional Internationalisation Plans, for example, HEIs may focus on study or work abroad which does not involve the use of the target language. Increasing the numbers of students studying or working abroad through the medium of English, for example, should not be understood as achieving the goals of *Languages Connect* in this regard.

2.4 *Incentivise the study of languages for the Leaving Certificate*

This concerns the possible introduction of bonus points for foreign languages in the Leaving Certificate, in a manner which may share similarities with the current system where bonus points are awarded for higher level mathematics. This is not an entirely new proposal. Table 5 replicates the proposed Action in *Languages Connect*.

Action	Timeline	Lead
Update on the consideration by HEIs of the provision of bonus points in foreign-language related higher-level Leaving Certificate subjects	Q4 2019	DES (in collaboration with the *Transitions Reform Steering Group*), HEIs

Table 5: Proposal for bonus points for foreign languages in the Leaving Certificate

It is possible that this proposal, if implemented, would encourage the study of foreign languages at higher level for the final School Leaving Certificate. Evidence for this view lies in the documented attitudeamong some pupils and their parents that it is difficult both to study foreign languages and to score well in languages examinations (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2015: 34-35).

The proposal is nonetheless complex. A key question is whether the bonus points would only be awarded to students who have applied to degree programmes in which the foreign language in question is a core element (O'Brien 2018). *Languages Connect* outlines that 'the issue of providing bonus points in Higher Level Leaving Certificate foreign language subjects in cases where students apply for higher education courses in language-related areas'

will be explored by the Transitions Reform Steering Group, in collaboration with the DES (DES 2017a, 10). If, however, this approach were to be adopted for foreign languages, it would result in two different systems of CAO bonus points operating simultaneously, one where bonus points are awarded in higher level mathematics to students regardless of their desired third level option; the second with a more tailored system for foreign language bonus points. Thus, a careful working out of this proposal will be necessary.

2.5   Develop University Language Policies

This relates to a requirement that HEIs have institutional language strategies and policies in place. *Languages Connect* (pp. 10) emphasises that the development and implementation of these strategies and policies, alongside the other objectives outlined in the strategy, should be monitored through a process of 'strategic dialogue' within the *Higher Education Systems Performance Framework 2018*-2020 (DES 2017a, 33). This framework outlines key Government objectives in relation to higher education as well as how institutions are to be assessed against these objectives during this period. It has been designed to enable the HEA to monitor the performance of universities in specific areas. As part of this process, universities engage in dialogue with the HEA to negotiate *Performance Compacts* which contain agreed targets. The degree to which HEIs meet their targets is used to inform government decision making and allocate funding to and within the Higher Education sector.

As well as specifying that HEIs should have language policies, Languages Connect indicates (Implementation Plan, pp. 17-18) that sectoral guidelines should be agreed to guide the development of university language policies. There is considerable scope here for language departments to take the lead in the development of such guidelines in line with international best practice in and research into language policy development (see for example Bruen, 2004, 2013; Chambers 2004; Mačianskienė 2011; Tollefson 2008), with Tollefson (2008: 3) clarifying that language policies created by educational institutions are:

> …statements of goals and means for achieving them that constitute guidelines or rules shaping language structure, language use, and language acquisition within educational institutions (Tollefson 2008: 3).

A further key document capable of informing the development of institutional language policies is a position statement published by the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (Cercles 2011). This document is presented in the form of guidelines for HEIs. It considers such core issues as why a HEI should have a language policy, the issues a policy should address and the ways in which a language policy should be developed. In particular, the document stresses that a HEI language policy should address issues at all levels of the organisation, including senior management, faculty leadership and programme development within schools/departments, and that it should be owned by the university as a whole rather than by a language school/department or centre. The importance of the publication and accessibility of an institution's language policy is also emphasised. Of particular significance in the context of this paper is the acceptance that an institutional language policy should be aligned both with the internal strategic goals of the institution and the goals relating to Ireland's linguistic profile (see Bruen 2013), as expressed in *Languages Connect*. Best practice would also indicate that it should be an evolving document subject to change and review and should relate to all forms of language provision within an institution.

Designing language policies in Irish HEIs will be a challenging process given common misconceptions around what a language policy is and who should take ownership of it. There can be a reductive tendency within universities to equate a language policy with an internationalisation policy and often solely with practical issues associated with the recruitment of non-EU students and the delivery of language classes on campus.

3. Commitment and Resources

This paper has selected five key objectives or targeted outcomes within *Languages Connect*, explored some of the scope for positive action that they engender and discussed potential challenges associated with each.

In a Section entitled, Commitment and Resources, *Languages Connect* (pp. 18-19) acknowledges that:

> Implementation of this Strategy will require active engagement from stakeholders across the education and training sector, across government departments and agencies, cultural organisations, employers and the media. Most importantly, it will require the commitment and motivation of education leaders and teachers as well as learners, their parents and employers.

The following section describes three university-level initiatives implemented by one Irish HEI which are potentially capable of contributing to the achievement of some of the core goals of *Languages Connect*:

3.1 Sample Initiatives in an Irish higher Education Institution

- *Introduction of an optional, certified year-abroad on undergraduate programmes*

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has added an optional year abroad to its offering of all undergraduate programmes. Students are not obliged to take up the offer, but all are offered the opportunity to do so. A range of destinations have been selected. Some offer the opportunity to study an appropriate discipline through the target foreign language, where students already have an adequate level of proficiency in that language to engage with the programme. Others allow students to study a discipline related to their undergraduate degree through English in the destination country.

In order to acknowledge the learning outcomes from the year abroad, the word 'International' has been added after the students' award title on their official degree parchment. This addition to the students' award title acts both as an incentive to engage with the year of study abroad and an indicator to employers and others that graduates have successfully completed such a year and developed their disciplinary, intercultural and, in some cases, their linguistic competencies.

- *Development of a Bachelor of Education with Languages [Irish plus French/German/Spanish] for entry 2019*

This refers to the development a new undergraduate initial teacher education degree with languages. At present, the proposed languages are Irish, and one of French, German and Spanish. During the programme, the students will study education and language modules. They will also complete three school placements in secondary schools, one semester in France, Germany or Spain in the second semester of the third year of the programme, and/or a stay in a Gaeltacht region. An additional element of the proposed new degree programme is the introduction of CLIL or Content and Language Integrated Learning modules. The language pedagogy modules for German, French, Spanish and Irish will be delivered and assessed through the target language. Students will engage with these modules during the first semester of the third year of the programme. The second semester will be spent in Germany, France or Spain where the students will study a combination of education and language pedagogy modules through the target language. They will complete their fourth and final year in Ireland. As such, the programme leads the way in the achievement of several key targets within Languages Connect, that is, the introduction of CLIL delivery as well as study and work placements abroad. In relation to second level, it is also designed to address the shortage of language teachers in schools, a further central objective in Languages Connect. If the external certification of language teachers in advance of registration with the Teaching Council is introduced, it will also apply to graduates of this programme. This means that the development of high (exit level B2.2 in all skills within the CEFR) levels of proficiency in both languages will be essential over the course of the four-year programme.

- *Incorporation of targets from Languages Connect into University Strategic Plans*

This university's recently published Strategic Plan includes elements of Languages Connect. In its Internationalisation Strategy, the university makes the following commitment:

> A […] Language strategy will be adopted which will include:
>
> (i) A framework by which the university can address the objectives of the Irish Government's 2017=2026 Foreign Languages Strategy.
>
> (ii) A plan to broaden inter-cultural and language offerings, both formal and informal, to […] staff, students and our external community.

This commitment will require the development and implementation of a university languages Strategy whose goals are aligned with those of *Languages Connect*.

These three initiatives represent ways in which one Irish university has responded to the types of challenge laid down by *Languages Connect*. There will be parallels in other Irish HEIs. Emanating primarily from with university departments and faculties, the initiatives outlined above are dependent on the support of many of the other stakeholders identified in the strategy, i.e. '…*stakeholders across the education and training sector, across government departments and agencies, cultural organisations, employers and the media… education leaders and teachers as well as learners, their parents and employers*…' (DES 2017a, pp. 18-19) for their success.

4. Concluding Remarks

The publication of *Languages Connect* in 2017 was an extremely welcome development. As discussed in this paper, the national strategy represents the outcome of extensive and genuine

collaboration between those involved in foreign language education in Ireland, in business and enterprise, and with policy-makers including the Department of Education and Skills.

Given their input into the development of the strategy, university language departments and schools are largely supportive of the goals and targets articulated in the strategy. The significant '*time, resources and commitment*' required to implement many of the goals (DES 2017a, pp.12, 18-19) may be less universally popular or may pose more challenges at the implementation stages. Indeed, there should be debate around the need to increase the discipline-weighting given to languages by the as part of the Higher Education Authority Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (HEA 2017). Nonetheless, in the spirit of the collaborative origins of the strategy, it is essential that universities take ownership of and work to support and achieve the objectives laid out in *Languages Connect*. Within HEIs, it is likely that the impetus for many supporting initiatives will come at least initially from language schools and departments. The primary challenge will be in securing adequate resources for these.

The fact that *Languages Connect* is part of the Higher Education Authority *Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020* (Section 2.5) suggeststhat it may have a greater impact than previous, more aspirational strategies and reports such as that published by the Department of Education and Skills in collaboration with the Council of Europe in 2008 and the Royal Irish Academy's report in 2011. As a result of the process of strategic dialogue underpinning the *Systems Performance Framework*, Senior Management within HEIs should develop an awareness of the targets set by *Languages Connect,* and of the need to meet at least some of those in order to secure performance-related government funding. Initiatives proposed by language departments such as those outlined in the previous section may, as a result, have a greater chance of support and success.

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