



STRUGGLING AT THE CORE:

Multilingualism and multiculturalism in a European University Alliance

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ABSTRACT

With the ultimate aim of finding ways to improve the systematic integration of linguistic and cultural competencies in engineering education, this paper addresses how culture and language competency education is discussed within a technical European University Alliance and how this discourse is translated – or not – into educational initiatives and activities. By doing this, we aim to put focus on the gap between a certain European Union ideology – “united in diversity” – which is at the very heart of the EU project, and the everyday practices at technical universities, where linguistic and cultural competency education are often considered as marginal activities or elective add-ons compared to the hard core of technical subjects.

The paper is based on European University Alliance documents and the observations and experiences made within one alliance’s working group on cultural and linguistic training during 2020-2022. We suggest that the gap between the

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rhetoric of multilingualism and multiculturalism and the reality of teaching and learning within the alliance has at least two sources: a tendency to engage in magical thinking where global competence develops “spontaneously” in international settings and a tendency to avoid addressing difficult questions, e.g., what multilingualism and multiculturalism actually mean in contemporary engineering education. This paper will provide some of the crucial questions that need addressing if we want to move beyond the empty rhetoric, as well as some practical suggestions for a systematic integration of cultural and linguistic competency education into engineering education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The European University alliances, exemplified in this paper by one of the first of its kind with an engineering profile, have the potential to systematically strengthen the integration of linguistic and cultural competencies in education, to the benefit of students, staff, educators and society at large. While the ambitious European University initiative in itself can be said to be in line with general trends of internationalisation in higher education [1] as well as older calls for comprehensive internationalisation [2], we would argue that the integrative training of global competence is – or at least should be – at the very heart of this educational endeavour, and also that this has a special relevance and importance for engineering education.

When the European Commission in 2019 announced the first selection of 17 European University alliances, representing more than 100 higher education institutions from all over Europe, this represented a qualitative change to the European educational area. The following year, the second call resulted in a total of 41 European University alliances, representing more than 280 institutions from 27 member states, and with further partner institutions from Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom – the aim of the initiative was as ambitious as its scale. On a rather obvious level, the initiative aimed at strengthening the European Education Area, increasing the European Union’s international competitiveness and capacity to deliver the education and research needed to meet present and future economic, societal and environmental challenges. Equally important, however, and in line with earlier EU initiatives for the integration of European higher education, was the initiative’s role in the ideological work to promote official “European values” and strengthen the idea of the European identity – “united in diversity”, as the motto of the European Union has been since 2000.

When answering the call of the European Union, the motivation of individual universities to join and the perceived importance of the initiative and of its different aspects most likely varied from one alliance to another. Motivation and perceptions probably also varied between the different institutions within the alliances, and even within the individual institutions. As the motivation to work as part of a European University varies, so do the challenges involved, and the opportunities.

Engineering education has a special position in the educational landscape as a self-designated producer of “problem-solvers”. It works at the interface between basic research and applied research and development, which is increasingly concerned with the grand challenges of our time, working towards a sustainable future while trying to balance the not necessarily aligned needs of the many stakeholders involved. Engineering graduates are increasingly expected, both by society and by industry, to possess the competence needed to effectively and appropriately communicate and work in environments characterised by cultural and social diversity, i.e., intercultural or global competence [3, 4]. The call for more socially skilled graduates is, however, a challenge for engineering universities, staffed foremostly by academics hired on the merits of often highly specialised technical knowledge, working in fields where ever more knowledge and specialised skills are seen as indispensable to already crammed curricula.

For educational leaders at these universities, internationalisation seems to be at least a partial answer to the question of how students can learn to work and communicate among people with backgrounds different from their own. Not only does internationalisation tend to help with the ubiquitous ranking lists, but also seems to be the answer to how students can acquire core competencies of a cultural and linguistic nature through international mobility. Furthermore, the scope of the European University alliances, like the other Erasmus programmes, also includes the mobility of teachers and staff. Given the challenge of many engineering universities to make room for global competence education or for languages beyond the local language and English, the European University alliance initiative holds much potential. This is true also of the alliance studied in this paper, Unite! – University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering, which we for the purpose of brevity will refer to as “the Alliance” [5].

The Alliance was created in 2019 between seven universities most of which had a long history of collaboration within the CLUSTER network. The official aim was to “be a model for a European University of innovation, technology and engineering addressing the Sustainable Development Goals through the twin digital and green transition.” The member universities were located in Germany, Finland, France, Sweden, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

In this paper, based on participant observation and document analysis, we explore how culture and language competency education has been discussed within the Alliance, and how this discourse has been translated – or not – into educational initiatives and activities. We will identify a gap between the Alliance’s official rhetoric of multilingualism and multiculturalism, and the preparedness to see this translated into systematic and effective educational activities that could help individuals – students, staff and educators – acquire the competencies needed to work effectively with the cultural and linguistic diversity of our globalised world.

We argue that this gap has two likely sources. The first being the seemingly fact-resistant belief that global competence will spontaneously develop in an international



work- or study environment. A second probable source is an avoidance strategy when it comes to addressing difficult questions such as what multilingualism and multiculturalism actually mean, or could mean, in engineering education today.

Finally, this paper outlines what we see as some crucial issues to address in order to move beyond the empty rhetoric. It also provides some practical suggestions to systematically integrate global and linguistic competency into a European University alliance such as the one discussed here.

2 METHODOLOGY

The data in this study come from multiple sources, both from official documents related to the EU project call and from observation notes and experiences of the members of the Multilingual and Multicultural Training Centre (henceforth M&M). The consulted texts include three official documents from three phases of the project: the first phase project proposal (2018), the progress report (2019), and the project proposal for the second phase of the project (2022). These documents serve similar purposes, addressed as they are to the grant giving organisation within the EU, and we believe that they can serve as good illustrations of how the concepts of multilingualism and multiculturalism have been framed, presented, and mobilised within the Alliance.

These documents are analysed in two stages: first a keyword search, then a text analysis to better understand how the keywords are used within the documents. In the first stage, a keyword search was performed across the three documents to track the evolution of the use of terms related to language, culture, diversity, internationalisation, skills and the like. In line with Dafouz's [6] study on another European University alliance, a keyword search related to the national languages of the members of the Alliance and English was also carried out. Table 1 includes a complete list of keywords for each document, the number of raw instances in each document, as well as the average times they appear per 1000 words in order to provide a means of comparison. Secondly, in order to investigate how the keywords were used, the passages of the documents including the keywords were analysed. This allowed us to understand the terms within the context of the document.

In addition to observing how the topics of multilingualism and multiculturalism are portrayed in the official documents for the EU grant, we also explore this question internally, based on the experience of members of the M&M-team working within the Alliance. An explanation of the group's goals and consequent experiences within the Alliance are developed in the next section of the paper.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 The Alliance's proposals

The official documentation reveals an evolution in how matters related to multilingualism and multiculturalism in the Alliance are presented within the context of the EU call.

Regarding the keywords *multilingual(ism)* and *multicultural(ism)*, we can clearly see their importance to the Alliance as there is a dedicated working group on this topic that is called the Multilingual and Multicultural Training Centre (M&M). Beyond this group, these terms have permeated the Alliance's communication, with an increase of the terms *multilingual(ism)* and, to a lesser extent, *multicultural(ism)* since the first proposal.

From the beginning, being multilingual and multicultural have been defined as “key to our mission to shape the mindsets of a new generation of European and global citizens and to educate the graduates that contribute to sustainable global Development” (1st phase project proposal, p. 158). Learning a language of one of the partner universities is seen as providing “better access to another European culture, increasing mutual cultural knowledge and understanding and helping students be part of the daily life of their host country” (1st phase project proposal, p. 109). Overall, this promotes “employability across Europe” (1st phase project proposal, p. 8, and 2nd phase project proposal, p. 38) Thereby, multilingualism and multiculturalism are seen to open doors and increase understanding, simply by being present. To acquire these competences, the Alliance intends to provide language courses and create opportunities for mobility and interaction. This communication around the benefits of immersing oneself into a multilingual and multicultural environment to increase linguistic and global competencies continues to be present in the 2nd phase project proposal.

Likewise, *diversity* and *diversity and inclusion* are also terms that increased significantly throughout the project. A working group separate from M&M is devoted to “diversity, inclusion and well-being”, and they have created a “Charter on Diversity and Inclusion”. Diversity is understood to promote multilingualism, and as such, is integrated throughout the University Alliance: “Diversity, inclusion and well-being as well as transversal themes with clear goals and activities to promote multilingualism in our education are addressed in various work packages” (2nd phase project proposal, p. 5). Interestingly, the buzzword *cultural diversity* has been all but forgotten since the 1st phase project proposal, and is no longer highlighted as it once was earlier in the project. Yet, it is still referenced indirectly in the text: “The multicultural and inclusive alliance also promotes the diversity and cultural heritage of its countries and regions, thus also supporting visibility of the different institutions in it” (2nd phase project proposal, p. 36).

Also, the use of the term *English*, while almost forgotten in the progress report (2021), saw substantial increase in the second phase project proposal (2022).

English has always been recognized as the official working language of the University Alliance members. At the same time, the national or regional languages of the partner universities are mentioned less often. In fact, the specific languages are mentioned only once in the 2nd phase project proposal. In addition, the keyword *language* is used less in the 2nd project call, probably because the term *multilingual(ism)* is privileged.

Lastly, we also note that while *European* – unsurprisingly – has been used consistently throughout all documents, the use of the terms *international* and *global* have declined in comparison. The focus is placed on promoting European identity and common European values and “strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture” (1st phase project proposal, p. 6). By the 2nd phase project proposal, this has been clarified as “actively contribut[ing] to European citizenship as well as to European attractiveness, resilience and competitiveness on a global scale” (2nd phase project proposal, p. 4).

Table 1: Keywords found in official documents from different phases of the project

	1st Phase Project Proposal (2018)		1st Phase Progress Report (2021)		2nd Phase Project Proposal (2022)	
	Raw instances (n=)	Normalised per 1000 words	Raw instances (n=)	Normalised per 1000 words	Raw instances (n=)	Normalised per 1000 words
	164 pages 102 072 words		49 pages 26 971 words		123 pages 47 132 words	
Language(s)	158	1.55	10	0.37	44	0.93
Linguistic	19	0.19	0	0.00	1	0.02
Multilingual(ism)	44	0.43	12	0.44	27	0.57
Culture	34	0.33	7	0.26	14	0.30
Multicultural(ism)	21	0.21	10	0.37	15	0.32
Intercultural	14	0.14	8	0.30	11	0.23
Diversity	18	0.18	13	0.48	44	0.93
Differences	4	0.04	3	0.11	5	0.11



Cultural diversity	18	0.18	0	0.00	1	0.02
Diversity and inclusion	2	0.02	4	0.15	14	0.30
English	26	0.25	2	0.07	28	0.59
Catalan	4	0.04	1	0.04	1	0.02
Finnish	12	0.12	4	0.15	1	0.02
French	12	0.12	6	0.22	3	0.06
German	17	0.17	6	0.22	5	0.11
Italian	16	0.16	1	0.04	2	0.04
Portuguese	14	0.14	0	0.00	1	0.02
Spanish	7	0.07	2	0.07	1	0.02
Swedish	16	0.16	4	0.15	2	0.04
European	373	3.65	147	5.45	262	5.56
Global	81	0.79	10	0.37	27	0.57
International	312	3.06	48	1.78	57	1.21
Internationalisation	6	0.06	6	0.22	5	0.11
Interdisciplinary/ interdisciplinarity	30	0.29	12	0.44	10	0.21
Cross-disciplinary	5	0.05	0	0.00	2	0.04
Skills	115	1.13	1	0.04	27	0.57
Language skills	11	0.11	0	0.00	0	0.00

Intercultural skills	4	0.04	0	0.00	0	0.00
Competence(s)	26	0.25	5	0.19	9	0.19
(Inter)cultural/ global competence	0	0.00	2	0.07	2	0.04
Transversal	17	0.17	6	0.22	11	0.23
Communication	115	1.13	43	1.59	112	2.38
Intercultural communication	2	0.02	0	0.00	0	0.00

3.2 The Multilingual and Multicultural Training Centre (M&M)

During its first phase, the Alliance was organised into ten “task forces”. Matters related to language and culture were delegated to a sub-task force known as the Multilingual and Multicultural Training Centre (in everyday Alliance communications and henceforth in this paper referred to as “M&M”), which was associated as part of the task force in charge of “student services”. This positioning of language and culture issues, which caused some internal complaints, likely mirrored the non-academic position of some, but not all, of the language centres at the partner universities. Thus, already from this organisational design there appeared to be a mismatch – intentional or not – between the rather peripheral position of language and culture matters in the overall Alliance structure, and the centrality of the concepts of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the words and spirit of the proposal.

The M&M working group was set up from the start to be responsible for developing and supporting language and global competence offers inside the Alliance. The language training offer includes both language courses (i.e. structured, formal learning) and language tandems (i.e. informal, largely student-led learning), with a view to equipping engineering students for an increasingly internationalised, multilingual and multicultural job market and academic environment.

The M&M team is made up of language teachers, researchers and administrative staff from the seven member universities, with varying degrees of professional experience and training. The members of M&M are themselves multicultural and multilingual due to their personal and educational histories, and include a range of extra-European family backgrounds, expertise and experiences. As in the rest of the Alliance, the working language in M&M is English. A possibly unique feature of this group within the context of the Alliance is that English is also the first language of several task force members. With these professional, cultural and linguistic credentials, the M&M team seem ideally equipped to tackle the complex task of developing a multilingual and multicultural offer inside the Alliance.



The team took shape over the year 2019-2020, adapting quickly to the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and soon established a work approach based on weekly virtual meetings, with only some work done outside meetings. The points on the agenda are dealt with as a whole group or in smaller groups that report back to the team at the end of the meeting. The meetings typically develop through frank and open discussion of the issues, and virtual collaboration tools such as Google Docs are frequently used to produce documents and materials.

Although the team was mostly able to keep to the agreed deadlines, quite a bit of time was needed in the first year to become familiar with and understand the different work modes and local conditions and opportunities of the various universities represented by the team members. Engaging though also complex discussions often took place as a result of quite varying perspectives on the issues at hand. The M&M team very early on produced a joint list of language and culture courses that each partner university was willing to share with the Alliance. Slightly more slowly, the language tandem project was structured and defined, and a variety of global competence initiatives were outlined, including a course in global competence and a series of videos produced by students to present their local cultures to students from other partner universities.

It soon became clear that organisational differences between the partner universities, in terms of academic calendars, administrative processes and the structures of the chain of command, constituted a major challenge to the effective deployment of an M&M language and global competence offer. In the spring of 2022, a small offer of virtual language courses and activities was finally launched, covering the eight Alliance languages as well as English, intercultural competence and including one serious game as an Open Educational Resources (OER). This virtual offer represents only a small sampling of the full language and global competence training offer available at the different partner universities. Nonetheless, it was considered sufficiently varied to be attractive and of use to the Alliance student community, and, given the organisational complexity of providing even this relatively small offer, it seemed a good enough start. To date, however, the uptake of these courses has been quite limited, and enrolments have been fraught with administrative difficulties. A more precise picture of the possible reasons for the scant interest in the M&M course offer is yet to be gained, but it appears that effectively promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism in the Alliance is far more complex than what is suggested by the confidently positive wording of the project proposals and report.

Beyond the organisational challenges outlined above, what ultimately stymied the M&M team would seem to be the fundamental contradiction between the theory and the practice of the Alliance with regard to multilingualism and multiculturalism. On the one hand the project proposals apparently support and encourage multilingualism and multiculturalism, to judge from the pervasive use of the terms throughout the documents, as shown in the Findings of this paper. The very fact that a specific task force has been assigned the responsibility for producing a language and culture offer inside the Alliance is a strong indication of intent. On the other hand, however, training



in languages and global competence is glaringly absent from joint programmes and content course offers, and even on paper only 3 ECTS are reserved for language learning activities in any given joint programme or content course, obviously not enough to enable any teaching and learning of real substance. Clearly, a way to bridge the gap between the theory (e.g. the proposal rhetoric) and practice (e.g. the material inclusion of effective multilingualism and multiculturalism in the Alliance) needs to be found. Drawing up an alliance policy on language and global competence seems strongly advisable, as is discussed in the next section.

A clarification of the terms used should also be highly useful. It could be the case that “multilingualism” and “multiculturalism” may not be the most appropriate terms for the purposes of materially enacting the endeavours of the European University initiative. Using EU terminology, both terms simply describe the presence of different languages and cultures within a community [7], i.e. the de facto situation when more than two universities from different EU countries interact. It might be the case that the terms “plurilingualism” and “pluriculturalism” are more appropriate for the initiative, as these terms indicate the ability to use a repertoire of diverse linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, and enrich that repertoire while doing so [7].

Even within M&M a mix of concepts has been used, likely reflecting the different backgrounds and expertise of the individuals involved. Early on, the group decided to do away with ideas found in the proposal and other texts that were seen as building on notions of cultural essentialism, especially in terms of national cultural stereotypes. Instead, the team preferred working with the non-essentialist notion of “small cultures” and proposed as a slogan for its work “the challenge of diversity”. The concept of global competence was also introduced at an early stage as being particularly fitting to an engineering endeavour working in the spirit of the European Union – united in diversity – while not forgetting the importance of connecting intercultural and plurilingual competence to the goal of “act[ing] for collective well-being and sustainable development” in the words used in the OECD definition of global competence [8].

Despite presenting these thoughts at several transnational Alliance meetings – so called Dialogues – and at full task force meetings, there is still a lack of formalised alliance-wide definitions put on print, and it remains highly unclear to what extent and in which way the understanding of central notions like these have been understood by other task forces in the Alliance. This lack of ready results, be it in educational activities or in the mindset of other colleagues working in the Alliance, was from time to time a source of great frustration within the M&M team.

Educational organisations, while sometimes able to respond very quickly to political steering and societal needs, are well known to find change difficult [9], and the frustration that was from time to time felt in the M&M team was most likely primarily related to the everyday red tape and inertia typical of higher education institutions general. In the case at hand, these standard difficulties were compounded due to the



need to bridge the administrative gaps between different institutions in an alliance that subscribed to a model of simultaneous top-down and bottom-up agency.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we see a major gap between the idea of multiculturalism and multilingualism, despite the centrality of the notions in the original proposal, and the systematic integration of teaching aimed at fostering globally competent (or plurilingual/interculturally competent) individuals. As mentioned above, we see two main reasons for this. On the one hand, the “magical thinking” often found in internationalisation initiatives, where the mere fact that people in a group have different backgrounds should somehow spontaneously make them acquire these competencies, without the need for scaffolding and institutional support. On the other hand, the more or less tacit understanding that “English is enough”.

The tendency to engage in magical thinking as described here is as prevalent as it has scientifically been proven faulty, and should rightly be questioned, confronted and dealt with [10, 11]. The idea that English is enough is a more complex one. It should be noted here that this idea is not officially acknowledged but clearly discernible from the fact that the Alliance exclusively uses English as its *lingua franca*, and its learning offers are only provided in English (with the few virtual language courses described above as the sole exception to the rule). That English is enough is also mirrored in the language-related trends seen in the three documents analysed above. The issue of teaching, cooperating and studying using English is not a trivial matter for participants who primarily have English as their second (or third) language. As the Bologna process has set the stage of European education, it is also increasingly feasible for European students to go through higher education completely relying on a combination of their institution’s first language and English. For engineers, this may appear reasonable, seeing as their primary labour market would seem to be either local – using the local language – or in international organisations where English as a rule is the common working language. So is this a problem at all? After all, most of our students, teachers and staff would do well to become even better at using English. We would argue that it is a problem, primarily for three reasons:

- By not actively encouraging language learning beyond the local and national language through the integration in official curricula, the Alliance fails to work towards the EU ambition of all citizens being proficient in their national language plus two other EU languages.
- By ensuring only the language skills needed to complete their studies, the Alliance falls short of realising its potential for fostering true European citizens that can become part and parcel of the principle of free labour mobility. English may be enough to conduct official work duties abroad, but the EU ambition is to go beyond the creation of an “intra-European expat cohort” living in cultural bubbles isolated from the local society.



- The ability to understand the viewpoints of others is a vital part of global competence. Even as we agree that global competence training does not per se presuppose more than one lingua franca, the traditional role of foreign languages as the lenses through which we can experience the world from different angles is by no means outdated. On the contrary, the rise of world English is both an enabler of communication and an enabler of miscommunication, especially considering that this international form of English is not cultureless, but is influenced by the sociopragmatic assumptions and conversational expectations of the speaker [12]. Therefore, English-only education that lacks a focus on the cultural implications of its speakers contributes little or nothing to develop the capacity to function well in linguistically heterogeneous situations and organisations.

European University alliances run a clear risk of succumbing to an overly Eurocentric perspective when it comes to issues of language and culture, and we would like to critique this from the perspective of global citizenship, a concept embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. For the time being, we can only regret, and take part of the responsibility for, the failure of the Alliance in formulating any strong vision of how multiculturalism and multilingualism could be used as a resource for effective global competence education in the context of the Alliance, and to commit to systematically strive to achieve that goal. In combination with efforts to strengthen activities related to internationalisation at home, we believe the potential benefits of the Alliance go well beyond the activities of the Alliance itself, making a failure to act even more lamentable.

5 FINAL REMARKS

We hope that in its next phase the Alliance will manage to rise to the challenge of diversity, embrace a vision of what global and plurilingual competence could mean within the context of the European University, and commit to realising this vision. Should it fail to do so, it will not be for lack of ideas. Between the literature and the expertise in the M&M team, the list of activities and initiatives could easily be made very long. Some examples would be to tweak existing courses and learning activities to ensure they all include a global competence dimension; to initiate multilingual projects in line with higher education multidisciplinary project work; to provide earlier opportunities for mobility in order to increase language learning motivation; to enable bilingual courses; to ensure that students have room in their programmes to study language and culture [13, 14, 15].

First and foremost, however, the Alliance must make up its mind about how to view issues of multiculturalism and multilingualism, taking seriously the fact that global or intercultural competence, and plurilingualism, is not something that comes to people by magic just by being in diverse company, and that not acting is wasting a chance to contribute substantially to the future development of European engineering education.



Thus, the first point on the agenda during the second phase of the Alliance should be to draft an Alliance Policy for global competence, multilingualism and multiculturalism, defining key concepts, laying down the Alliance's overarching objectives and standards in these areas for faculty, staff and students, as well as for joint endeavours, and the means to reach these.

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