

## UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

## LANGUAGE POLICY

Approved by Council on 04 December 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistic diversity is a resource for creativity, selfhood and cognition that should be cultivated and protected through institutions of higher learning in the 21st century. In its mission to offer education within the context of a multilingual nation state, the University of the Witwatersrand recognises that learning the languages of South Africa is not only an important means of enhancing understanding of one another, but also an imperative in producing multilingual graduates. Moreover, given the University's status as a national premier institution situated in the most diverse city in the country, its policy should reflect this national character while staying globally competitive. In order to create opportunities for an appropriate balance between English and other national official languages, the resources of the University need to be mobilized to develop at least two indigenous spoken African languages, which represent the two major language clusters Nguni and Sotho in South Africa, and to enhance the language competencies of staff and students in learning and teaching, interpersonal communication, research, and administration. Because of the University's commitment to inclusiveness and reasonable accommodation, South African Sign Language (SASL) will continue to be supported by the University. The University aims to become a multilingual institution with two major African languages and SASL in addition to English.

This policy is informed by South African legislation and policies including the *South African Constitution* (Act No. 108 of 1996), the *South African Schools Act* (Act No. 4 of 1996 as amended by Act No. 15 of 2011), Government's policy on people with disabilities - *An Integrated National Disability Strategy* (1997), the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (Act No. 4 of 2000) the Ministry of Education's *Language Policy for Higher Education* (2002), the *Employment Equity Amendment Act* (Act No. 47 of 2013). This policy is also in line with a number of Wits documents and policies such as the language research conducted at the University during 2002 and 2014 (see Appendices A and B), *Policy on the employment and advancement of persons with disabilities* (Wits 2013) and the *Wits Employment Equity Plan* (2015-2019). These acts, policies and documents make clear the necessity of developing a multilingual environment in which all languages are developed for use in education and of ensuring that the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) does not serve as a barrier to access and success. All educational institutions are required to produce a language policy that furthers transformation in South Africa. While respecting the autonomy of institutions to determine their own language policy, such determination has to be within the policy parameters set by government. The policy framework for higher education requires institutions to address the following issues:

- languages of instruction (LOLTs / languages of learning and teaching)

- the future of South African languages as fields of academic study and research
- the study of foreign languages
- the promotion of multilingualism in its policies and practices.

Johannesburg is the most linguistically diverse city in South Africa. This multilingual context creates opportunities for learning a range of African languages. Both the 2002 and 2014 language surveys show that Sesotho and IsiZulu are the most widely understood African languages in the immediate environment of the University. These languages also represent two major language clusters (Nguni and Sotho) to which 7 indigenous African languages belong. In addition, Sesotho has rich historical and cultural ties with Johannesburg (Gauteng – a Sesotho name for a place of gold) and isiZulu is the majority national language – the only language that has a 3% increase in the latest Census. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence of the linguistic practices of the Johannesburg Deaf community indicates that the localised variety of SASL is in the process of becoming the prestigious variety of SASL in the country. Hence, the University’s multifocal policy should include isiZulu, Sesotho, SASL and English. The latter has the advantage of being an international language.

In order to assure parity of esteem, transform the University’s linguistic profile, unlock cross cultural understanding and enhance access to knowledge, isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL will be developed incrementally over time through a phased implementation plan. Phase 1 will focus on developing a multilingual linguistic landscape and branding; Phase 2 will focus on development of the materials and resources needed for the teaching of isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL as subjects for communicative purposes. Phase 3 will focus on developing the linguistic abilities of staff and students. Staff and students who do not speak or use any indigenous South African language will be required to become communicatively competent in either isiZulu, Sesotho or SASL. Those who speak African languages will be required to choose either a spoken African language (provided their language of choice is not from their home language cluster) or SASL. . Speakers of minority African languages (Xitsonga and Tshivenda) will choose either isiZulu, Sesotho or SASL. The University commits itself to enhancing proficiency and academic literacies in English for staff and students whose home language is an African language or a foreign language. In Phase 4 the University will play a role in the development of the isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL as LOLTs alongside English in appropriate and feasible contexts.

Research conducted at the University shows that many languages are used for social interaction at Wits, as well as in tutorials and practicals. It is also common practice for administrative and support staff to use English and African languages in both social and work contexts. The University will continue to encourage these discursive multilingual practices.

## **POLICY**

The University commits itself to a multilingual approach to tertiary education and the phased development of isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL as languages that can be acquired as subjects and used as LOLTs together with English.

Phase 1 of the policy will be completed by 2016 and Phase 2 will begin in 2018. In 2018 the University will consider time frames for Phases 3 and 4, based on the

national language landscape at the time. In order to achieve this policy, the University will need to:

- 1 Support multilingualism by
  - Valuing the use of all official eleven official languages for formal and informal interactions on the University campus, including SASL (which is legally recognised as an **official** language for purposes of teaching in public schools).
  - Translating key documents such as contracts, rules, application and registration forms, into isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL.
  - Providing interpreting services when required e.g. disciplinary hearings.
  - Including multilingual and multicultural practices at ceremonial gatherings e.g. graduations and inaugurations.
  - Changing the linguistic landscape on campus through multilingual signage in English, isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL to reflect the university language policy.
  - Adopting multilingual branding in English, isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL.
- 2 Develop isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL by
  - Researching and developing language teaching resources, materials and courses for language acquisition in isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL on a level appropriate for staff and students.
  - Researching and developing curricula materials in isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL for primary, secondary and tertiary education.
- 3 Develop languages of learning and teaching by
  - Researching and implementing isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL as LOLTs in Higher Education.
  - Providing academic support to ensure that all students achieve academic literacy in English by the end of their first degree.
- 4 Develop the linguistic proficiency of staff by
  - Providing courses for all staff to acquire proficiency in English to perform their jobs.
  - Providing courses in isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL for all staff.
  - Ensuring that staff, in addition to English, acquire at least communicative competence in either isiZulu, Sesotho or SASL
- 5 Develop the linguistic proficiency of students by
  - Ensuring that students who do not speak / use an indigenous African language acquire communicative competence in either isiZulu, Sesotho or SASL.
  - Ensuring that students who speak an African language acquire communicative proficiency in a language from a different linguistic cluster, so that students who speak a Nguni language acquire Sesotho or SASL, and students who speak a Sotho language acquire isiZulu or SASL

- Ensuring that majors in isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL are offered.

6 Review of language policy. This policy will be reviewed at the end of 2017.

## **RATIONALE**

The rationale for the policy is related to each of the separate policy statements.

### **The rationale for multilingualism**

South Africa's language policy since 1926 has ensured that all educated South Africans are at least bilingual. The majority of South Africans in urban areas, whether educated or not, are multilingual. According to research conducted at Wits, 80% of the respondents use more than one language and 50% use three or more languages<sup>1</sup>. However, indigenous African languages have always been relegated to a lower social status and not endorsed as required languages by educational institutions. In addition, Apartheid segregated speakers of African languages according to language differences through the Bantustan homeland system. To redress these linguistic imbalances of the past and valorise the linguistic pluralism that characterises South Africa, all students+ should graduate from tertiary institutions in a post-apartheid South Africa with an ability to communicate in languages that cross the racial and cultural divide. In addition, it is important to give social status, not just official recognition, to all the languages that students speak / use. No language should be excluded from the University campus as the University seeks to support the progressive elimination of language barriers to participation in the educational, cultural, social and economic life of the institution. Moreover, the *Language Policy for Higher Education* (2002) supports the study of foreign languages, particularly those languages necessary for the country's cultural, trade and diplomatic relations.

### **Rationale for the choice of isiZulu and Sesotho**

A recent survey upon which this policy is based shows that both isiZulu and Sesotho are the two main African languages spoken at the University. To become a truly multilingual university in South Africa, cross-cultural pollination between two major language groups in South Africa, Nguni and Sotho, is of paramount importance. IsiZulu is the majority national language, giving access to the cognate varieties of isiXhosa, isiNdebele and siSwati. The city of Johannesburg has been an ancestral place for Sesotho speakers since pre-colonial times, and provides access to its related language varieties: Sepedi and Setswana. Linguistic research shows that there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility within each of the two language clusters and thus knowledge of the two languages by staff and students enable them to have access to 7 official languages. The University of the Witwatersrand is geographically well placed to harness this linguistic plurality. Leaning towards either language group would be inconsiderate of the historical, cultural and political circumstances in which these languages operated. As a national institution, the University stays clear of the past linguistic enclaves (tribes) reminiscent of Bantustan systems that encouraged one African language per homeland and instead champions linguistic transformation, following the lead of successful international multilingual institutions (e.g. Freiburg University).

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<sup>1</sup> All percentages in this policy refer to a percentage of the respondents sampled in the Language Policy Research conducted at the University in 2002.

Since 1994 African languages have been used increasingly in the public and private sector, while this has not been the case in the University. Hence, the adoption of isiZulu and Sesotho as languages of business, communication and education will align the University with the Language Policy for Higher Education (2002). It will allow an opportunity to develop these languages for teaching and learning, research and for conducting university business with other (inter)national academic, business, donor, and research communities and to meet the expectations of the changing landscapes in these communities.

The adoption of the policy will help the University take stock of and align individual linguistic and cultural interventions by different departments such as Engineering, Schools (Medicine and Education), and Faculties within the University.

The repositioning of the Wits language policy comes against the backdrop of calls by scholars such as Ngugi (2012) and a growing interest in the language of scholarship in Africa interested in intervening in the way in which knowledge about Africa and African languages is produced and disseminated.

Furthermore, the adoption of isiZulu and Sesotho in the university will respond to the calls by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) which have adopted resolutions “to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by the peoples of the world” and to “promote unity in diversity and international understanding, through multilingualism and multiculturalism” (United Nations Resolution 61/266 of 16 May 2007).

### **Rationale for the choice of English**

The university, as a centre of excellence, aims to graduate students with a full command of the English language. English language skills are essential for a successful career in South Africa and internationally. It is a source of deep concern therefore that recent graduates of the University seem to struggle to achieve satisfactory levels of proficiency in oral and written communication. Research conducted at Wits indicates that there is overwhelming support from all students for improving their English language skills. A concerted effort by all faculties to prioritise oral and written English skills will ensure that Wits graduates have an advantage in attaining successful careers.

### **Rationale for the choice of South African Sign Language**

The adoption of SASL as a language to be supported alongside isiZulu and Sesotho in the Wits language policy will signal the University’s commitment to inclusiveness and linguistic diversity. Wits would also be the only South African university actively to support SASL in its language policy. Although not an official language, SASL is recognised as official language for the purposes of teaching in public schools (*SA Schools Act, 1996*) and furthermore the *South African Constitution* of 1996 specifically mentions that conditions should be created for the development and use of SASL. It is the LOLT for the majority of Deaf learners in South Africa, and is used as a first language by approximately 1 683 000 Deaf South Africans according to the Central Statistic Service 1994 mid-year estimates. Government policies and legislation also acknowledge SASL as the means through which Deaf people become economically and intellectually empowered. The SASL curriculum is being rolled out

in schools for Deaf learners as from 2015, and there is an urgent need for qualified educators to teach the language in primary and secondary schools.

Wits is uniquely placed to develop SASL and to contribute to the advancement of the constitutional principles of social justice and equity in the country. Johannesburg has the largest concentration of signers in South Africa. As mentioned in the introductory section, anecdotal evidence of the linguistic practices of the Johannesburg Deaf community indicates that the localised variety of SASL is in the process of becoming the prestigious variety of SASL in the country. SASL-related programmes are taught in three schools in the University. In the School of Literature, Language and Media, the Department of South African Sign Language offers courses in SASL proficiency to Honours level, using the medium of SASL and research degrees at Master's and PhD level. In addition, the Department of Translation & Interpreting trains SASL interpreters and oversees related research. In the School of Education, the Centre for Deaf Studies is involved in the training of educators for Deaf learners. The Wits Language School teaches both SASL and sign language interpreting as part of its continuing education programme for the community at large. Staff and postgraduate students, in collaboration with members of the Johannesburg Deaf community who have successfully completed Level 3 theory courses in SASL, are developing materials for the SASL school curriculum at the request of the National Department of Education, including the creation of new terminology for theoretical concepts in the language. In addition, sign language interpreting services are provided by the Disability Unit to Deaf students, and the School of Human and Community Development actively encourages students of Speech Pathology and Audiology to achieve communicative competency in SASL by completing the Level 1 / first year courses. Furthermore, the University already uses sign language interpreting at graduation ceremonies, where it is a visible sign of the University's commitment to diversity.

Given this nexus of expertise and that SASL is already a language of learning and teaching in the University, the inclusion of SASL in the language policy would acknowledge and foreground current well-established practices in this area and ensure continued support for them.

### **The need for teaching materials**

The policy proposes the development of language teaching materials and appropriate pedagogy as the starting point. Existing textbooks and materials for teaching African languages are outdated and are framed by the apartheid curricula and syllabuses for which they were produced. In addition, these materials do not recognise urban varieties. Their insistence on older standard forms is alienating for urban students who speak contemporary forms of isiZulu and Sesotho. Although the SASL Department is working on the publication of a theoretical SASL text book, there are currently no such text books. Current approaches to teaching African languages and SASL need to take cognisance of developments in the field of Applied Linguistics. Materials need to meet the needs of contemporary students and should not be limited to an apartheid vision of the languages used only in closed rural communities. All courses that are developed should be subsidy-earning in the case of students, and part of the Human Resources Development Programme, eligible for the skills development levy in the case of staff. Alternatively, courses may also be short courses which provide third stream income. It should be noted that courses have been and are in the process of

being developed by various stakeholders within the University, such as the School of Education, School of Literature, Language and Media, the Wits Language School, and the Faculties of Engineering and the Built Environment and Health Sciences.

### **The need for developing the linguistic abilities of students and staff**

All students need full competence in English to excel in their academic studies, to have access to the international literature, and to be prepared for the world of work. Courses in academic literacy and English are the responsibility of Faculties, Schools and disciplines, and proficiency is already a requirement in all qualifications. The language policy research conducted by the University is unequivocal in stressing the need for courses that enable the acquisition by students of full spoken and written competence in English. There is evidence to suggest that speakers of African languages and users of SASL would like more support than the University is currently offering.

Courses in isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL will be provided for all students.. In this way, the University will be the centre of multilingual development, breaking away from the Bantustan system that precluded speakers of African languages from learning other African languages. Learning isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL will enable students who neither speak an African language nor have communicative proficiency in SASL, to interact differently with their fellow South Africans at the University and outside it. In addition, learning a non-cognate language provides insight to alternative ways of construing the world. For foreign students, learning isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL will enable them to communicate with the broader community in and around Johannesburg.

Multilingual graduates are better prepared for the world of work in South Africa. In addition, they will be able to undertake research on a broader range of questions in Nguni and Sotho-speaking communities nationwide, as well as Deaf communities in different provinces.

Multilingual awareness and proficiency among staff will enhance the teaching and learning environment of the University and enrich the staff and student experience. It will also lead to greater inclusiveness in the University working environment, also for Deaf staff members and students.

### **Rationale for multilingual media of instruction in the long term**

The policy sets the University on the path to introducing multilingual media of instruction in Phase 4.

The University acknowledges that language should not be a barrier to the acquisition of knowledge. Currently millions of South Africans do not complete their schooling, partly because they are taught and assessed through the medium of English or Afrikaans and have no access to concepts in a language that they fully understand. To overcome this negative legacy, it is essential to develop the indigenous African languages of South Africa in order to provide equal access to education. Sesotho-English or isiZulu-English multilingual LOLTs in Higher Education will remove the barrier to introducing African languages as LOLTs at lower levels. Although the University is working towards a multilingual policy of LOLTs, other available linguistic resources that might aid students' understanding will be used. For example,

multilingual practices in tutorials will continue; materials and resources developed by other institutions in the other South African languages will be included in the University's libraries.

### **The rationale for shared responsibility with stakeholders in government**

The University undertakes actively to establish partnerships with relevant government stakeholders to research and develop materials and resources in isiZulu, Sesotho, English and SASL for University-based courses for its staff and students. In addition, the existing programme at the Wits Language School provides a range of language-related courses to the public and private sectors. The University can increase its third stream income by encouraging shared partnerships in government.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

The implementation plan is guided by four language policy and planning principles: Status, Corpus, Acquisition and Attitudinal (rehabilitation) Planning. Each of the principles assumes continuous corpus planning (and implementation). Dates are indicative only.

Phase 1: Implementation mechanisms

Phase 2: Branding and linguistic landscaping in four languages: 2016-2017

Phase 3: Communicative competency in isiZulu or Sesotho or SASL, in addition to English by all staff and students (learning a language): 2016-2018

Phase 4: Intellectualization of isiZulu, Sesotho and SASL as academic media: 2018-2020

Phase 5: Learning through isiZulu, Sesotho, SASL and English: 2018 (Milestone 1: trialing with 3-5 subjects).