

# Policy of Multilingualism at a Higher Education Institution of Latvia in Context of Globalization

## *Daudzvalodības politika Latvijas augstskolā globalizācijas kontekstā*

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In the circumstances of globalization, one of the main concerns for a modern higher education institution is to provide its graduates with excellent language skills necessary for launching and managing their professional career on a multicultural labour market. In this context, it was necessary to establish students' opinion regarding the possibilities to promote a policy of multilingualism at a higher education institution. The main conclusion of the research – it is important for students to take study courses not only in their native language but also in other languages to succeed in their professional career.

**Keywords:** language, higher education institution, multicultural environment, multilingualism policy, multicultural labour market.

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, significant economic and political changes have taken place all over the world. These changes also have affected language teaching and learning practices across the globe. There is a movement towards multilingual practices in the world, the title of UNESCO 2003 education position paper “Education in a Multilingual World” being one of the proofs thereof. As stated by researcher N. K. Singh, with globalization, the focus of language education has shifted from monolingualism towards multilingualism, and multilingual practices have become a norm rather than an exception in most of the world (Singh, 2013). In addition, according to the data published by University of Cambridge, at present more than half of the world's population speaks more than one language in everyday life (University of Cambridge, 2017).

Multilingualism, as defined by Professor Richard Nordquist, “is the ability of an individual speaker or a community of speakers to communicate effectively in three or more languages” (Nordquist, 2016). Besides, according to the explanation provided by [letonika.lv](http://letonika.lv), multilingualism means not using different languages (words, forms and phrases of different languages) chaotically at the same time, but instead using each language in an appropriate situation ([Letonika.lv](http://letonika.lv), 2017).

Multilingualism is in the focus of attention of the European Union, as well. In compliance with “Barcelona Objective”, agreed in 2002, the European Commission is working with national governments to meet an ambitious goal: enabling citizens to communicate in two languages other than their native language. As suggested, children should be introduced to two foreign languages at an early age, thus speeding up language learning and simultaneously boosting their mother tongue skills. The reasons for promoting multilingualism have been formulated in the European Commission’s Communication “Multilingualism – an Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment” (2008): harmonious co-existence of many languages in Europe; the factor of competitiveness as well as ensuring more efficient language teaching and learning (European Commission, 2017).

The aspect of multilingualism is also a topical research issue in Latvia. According to researcher I. Apine, multiculturalism is becoming inevitable with the ethnic changes caused by globalization processes in the world and spreading of liberalism standards. It is an alternative to racism, chauvinism and imposed assimilation (Apine, 2004). In accordance with sociologist A. Šņitņikovs, as we are the people of multicultural society, our cultural and linguistic identity is dynamic and changeable (Šņitņikovs, 2006). Moreover, multiculturalism and multilingualism are the reality of present-day labour market both locally and internationally. Consequently, it is important for higher education institutions to integrate learning of different languages in their study programmes to help students to promote their professional career. Therefore, programme managers require information about their students’ opinion on promoting the policy of multilingualism at a higher education institution. Thus, the aim of the research was to identify the students’ opinion regarding the following questions:

- 1) Which languages could be useful for their professional career?
- 2) Would they like to acquire study courses in different languages (English, Russian, Latvian, German, other languages)?
- 3) Is their knowledge of foreign languages sufficient to acquire study courses in different languages (English, Russian, Latvian, German, other languages)?

Students explained their point of view and wrote the answers to these questions in the essay “My Attitude Towards Multilingualism at University”.

Later, this information may be used in the course of study programme management to make them more competitive and up to date, meeting the requirements of present-day labour market.

## Material and methods

The method of the research was content analysis of students’ essays.

The essay “My Attitude Towards Multilingualism at University” was organized in the first semester of the academic year 2016/17.

According to the theoretical literature analysis (Hamel, 1993; Kroplis & Raščevska, 2004; Geske & Grīnfelds, 2006), the content analysis was done, as follows:

- 1) the content of the essays was divided into fragments (units) containing separate statements of respondents, which characterize and/or interpret their experience,

- 2) the meaning of the units was clarified,
- 3) units containing similar ideas were grouped in analytical categories,
- 4) categories were united forming large-scale concepts based on the content of these categories.

70 students of Riga Technical University (RTU) wrote the essay. They were the students of the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students), and the Faculty of E-learning Technologies and Humanities (1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students). The students belonged to different nationalities: 30 Latvians, 21 Russians and foreign students – 17 Uzbeks, 1 Armenian and 1 Azerbaijani.

Before writing the essay, a discussion on the same topic was held with the students to identify the most important issues regarding the topic, which were later used to formulate the questions of the essay.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Languages, which could be useful for students' professional career

The environment of the present-day labour market could be characterized as multicultural and multilingual. Therefore, the students' opinion on the languages important for their professional career was identified. The results of the research prove that it is useful for students to know different languages for the development of their professional career:

- 1) English has been stated as the most popular language – the language spoken by everybody; the language of communication; the language of modern technologies; a “must-know” language. The possibilities to study and develop the professional career abroad favour students' motivation to learn English. The necessity to know English has been emphasized by all groups – Latvians, Russians and foreign students;
- 2) students of all groups (Latvians, Russians, foreign students) have evaluated the status of Russian highly, as it is important to know Russian to integrate in the labour market of Latvia successfully; it is beneficial to be able to communicate and make professional contacts with Russian speaking people all over the world. It is interesting that students (5 Latvians and 2 Russians) consider as important to know also the other languages of Latvia's neighbouring countries – Lithuanian, Estonian, Ukrainian, Polish to cooperate and communicate with the people of these countries;
- 3) German has been evaluated as the third most useful language for students' professional development. The students have a point of view that it is advantageous for RTU students to study German, as Germany is one of the largest and technically most developed countries in Europe. Several students aspire to connect their professional activities with Germany;
- 4) students have almost equally assessed the necessity to know Spanish, French and also oriental languages – Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Turkish. The willingness of students to speak French could be explained by the increase of French popularity in the world. Whereas, due to the development of cooperation between RTU and Spain, students are more motivated to study

Spanish. The students' interest in oriental countries could be explained with a very high level of development of these countries – both in economics and modern technologies – and the fact that these languages are spoken by a large number of people;

- 5) students have also shown interest in less popular languages – Scandinavian, Greek, Albanian, Italian and Dutch – considering the knowledge of these languages to be useful for their professional career;
- 6) students have been attracted not only to the so called “living languages” but also to “endangered languages” to retain the connection with these cultures;
- 7) about 50% of Russian speaking students consider their Latvian to be sufficient for studies and professional career, whereas, about 50% (9 out of 21) of Russian speaking students expressed willingness to improve their Latvian. Russian speaking students wanted to perfect their Latvian to escape language difficulties during their studies at RTU and later – to integrate into the labour market. A low interest of Uzbek students (3) could be interpreted with their plans to study and live in Latvia only temporarily. Only one Uzbek student has decided to connect his life with Latvia. It is interesting that Latvians also wanted to improve their native language (4 students). All of them were the students of Technical Translation programme, which requires good Latvian skills.

The results of the research have been summed up in Table 1.

*Table 1*  
*1. tabula*

**Which languages could be useful for your professional career?**  
***Kuras valodas varētu būt noderīgas jūsu profesionālajā karjerā?***

Units	Students	Categories	Concept
“English – the language spoken by everybody; the language of modern technologies; “must know” language”	Latvians (30), Russians (20), Foreign students (13)	English – international language	The status of English
“It is necessary to know Russian to integrate into the labour market of Latvia successfully; the language of communication”	Latvians (23), Russians (17), Foreign students (13)	Russian – international language	The status of Russian
“It is necessary to know the languages of neighbouring countries (Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish, Ukrainian, etc.)”	Latvians (5), Russians (2), Foreign students (0)	Interest in languages of neighbouring countries (Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish, Ukrainian, etc.)	The status of languages of Latvia's neighbouring countries

Units	Students	Categories	Concept
“German – advantageous language, as Germany is one of the most technically developed countries in Europe”	Latvians (12), Russians (11), Foreign students (11)	The increase of German popularity	The status of German
“I would like to know Spanish as I am planning to study in Spain”	Latvians (6), Russians (6), Foreign students (3)	Interest in Spanish studies	The status of Spanish
“French is becoming more popular in the world”	Latvians (4), Russians (4), Foreign students (4)	The increase of French popularity	The status of French
“The knowledge of Scandinavian languages will be useful for my professional career”	Latvians (2), Russians (6), Foreign students (0)	Interest in less popular languages, for example, Scandinavian languages	The status of Scandinavian languages
“I would like to know some of “endangered” languages to retain the connection with these cultures	Latvians (1), Russians (0), Foreign students (0)	Interest in “endangered” languages	The status of “endangered” languages
“It is useful to study oriental languages (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Turkish) because they are spoken by a large number of people; these countries have a very rapid development”	Latvians (3), Russians (5), Foreign students (6)	The increase of popularity of oriental languages	The status of oriental languages
“I am interested in less popular languages – Dutch, Italian, Greek and Albanian”	Latvians (3), Russians (2), Foreign students (0)	Interest in less popular languages, for example, Dutch, Italian, Greek and Albanian	The status of Dutch, Italian, Greek and Albanian
“I would like to improve my Latvian”	Latvians (4), Russians (9), Foreign students (3)	Interest in Latvian	The status of Latvian

One of the ways of the higher education institution to realize a policy of multilingualism could be the implementation of study courses in different languages. Hence, it was necessary to find out students’ opinion regarding the following question: would students like to have study courses in different languages (English, Russian, Latvian, German, other languages)?

## 2. Possibility to acquire study courses in different languages at a higher education institution

The results brought by content analysis of students’ essays prove that students would like to have study courses in different languages:

- 1) students in all three groups – Latvians, Russians, foreign students – highly evaluate the possibility to acquire study courses in English. English is

- considered to be the most popular foreign language to help them grow professionally;
- 2) a large part of students – Latvians (12), foreign students (12) – express their willingness to acquire study courses in Russian. One of the Latvian students would like to study another Slavic language – Polish. The Latvian students' choice to attend study courses in Russian and willingness to improve their Russian language skills could be explained by the requirements of the modern labour market in Latvia, which call for sufficient knowledge of Russian, and those students who want to enter the international labour market (foreign students and also Latvian students) could find the Russian language skills an important advantage;
  - 3) German is the third most popular language chosen by students. This fact could be explained with the consideration that so that many students have already studied German at school, hence, their knowledge of this language is better in comparison with Spanish or French;
  - 4) Students – Latvians (5) and foreign students (5) – have interest in study courses in Spanish. Latvian students have a little less interest in the opportunities to study in French – (2 students) – but foreign students are quite interested in this language (4). The Russian students are not overly willing to study in Spanish (1 student) and no Russian students would like to attend study courses in French. However, they have mentioned Spanish (6 students) and French (4 students) as the languages important for their professional career. It could be explained with the fact that Russian students evaluate the knowledge of their Spanish and French as insufficient to acquire study courses in these languages;
  - 5) although students (Latvians (3), Russians (5), foreign students (5)) consider oriental languages – Chinese, Korean, Japanese – to be important to realize their professional aims, the possibility to attend study courses in these languages has been mentioned by a smaller number of students – Latvians (2), Russian (1), foreign students (4). It could be explained by the complicity of oriental languages, the limited possibilities to use these languages in Latvia and the lack of professional teachers;
  - 6) the number of students (Russian (2), foreign students (4), more Latvians (9)) who would like to have study courses in Latvian is rather small. As English and Russian are the most popular languages used in the study process of foreign students, the interest of foreign students about the possibility to study in Latvian could be explained by their aim to communicate with other students – Latvians – and more successfully integrate in the Latvian environment, whereas a low interest of Russian students in studies conducted in Latvian could be interpreted with the fact that they have already been studying in Latvian; their knowledge of Latvian is sufficient; and for the development of their professional career it is also important to improve the knowledge of other languages. The support of Latvian students (9) to attending study courses in Latvian could be accounted for by the consideration that since their school time Latvian students have rather

been used to studying mostly in monolingual environment, while according to the Education Reform of 2004, Russian students have to acquire 60% of their study subjects in Latvian. That could explain the fact that the Russian students are more experienced in studying in diverse language environment – at least in Latvian and Russian.

The results of the research have been summarized in Table 2.

Table 2  
2. tabula

**Would you like to attend study courses in different languages  
(English, Russian, Latvian, German, other languages)?**  
*Vai jūs vēlētos apgūt studiju kursus dažādās valodās  
(angļu, krievu, latviešu, vācu, citās valodās)?*

Units	Students	Categories	Concept
“I would like to attend study courses in English”	Latvians (18), Russians (18), Foreign students (17)	Studies in English	The status of English
“I would like to attend study courses in Russian”	Latvians (12), Russians (8), Foreign students (12)	Studies in Russian	The status of Russian
“I would like to attend study courses in German”	Latvians (7), Russians (7), Foreign students (15)	Studies in German	The status of German
“I would like to attend study courses in French”	Latvians (2), Russians (0), Foreign students (4)	Studies in French	The status of French
“I would like to attend study courses in Spanish”	Latvians (5), Russians (1), Foreign students (5)	Studies in Spanish	The status of Spanish
“I would like to attend study courses in Polish”	Latvians (1), Russians (0), Foreign students (0)	Studies in Polish	The status of Polish
“I would like to attend study courses in oriental languages – Chinese, Korean, Japanese”	Latvians (2), Russians (1), Foreign students (4)	Studies in oriental languages	The status of oriental languages
“I would like to attend study courses in Latvian”	Latvians (9), Russians (2), Foreign students (4)	Studies in Latvian	The status of Latvian

Since it is necessary to have sufficient knowledge of foreign languages to study in them, the third main question of the research was posed to identify whether students evaluate their knowledge of foreign languages (English, Russian, German, other languages) as sufficient to attend study courses conducted in these languages.

### 3. Evaluation of students' knowledge of foreign languages

The results of the research prove:

- 1) Students – Latvians (22), Russians (16), foreign students (13) – consider the knowledge of their English as sufficient to attend study courses in English;

- 2) students – Latvians (18), Russians (14), foreign students (9) – have evaluated their knowledge of Russian as sufficient to attend study courses in this language;
- 3) students' knowledge of German has been assessed more critically – 9 Latvians and 1 Russian student regard their German as sufficient;
- 4) the knowledge of less popular languages, for example, Spanish has been evaluated as sufficient only by 3 Latvians, and the knowledge of Italian has been evaluated positively only by 1 Russian student.

The results of the research have been summed up in Table 3.

*Table 3*  
*3. tabula*

**Is your knowledge of foreign languages sufficient to attend study courses in them  
(English, Russian, German, other languages)?**

*Vai jūsu svešvalodu zināšanas ir pietiekamas, lai apgūtu studiju kursus  
angļu, krievu, vācu, citās valodās?*

Units	Students	Categories	Concept
“My English is sufficient to attend study courses in English”	Latvians (22), Russians (16), Foreign students (13)	Sufficiency of English knowledge	Evaluation of English knowledge
“My Russian is sufficient to attend study courses in Russian”	Latvians (18), Russians (14), Foreign students (9)	Sufficiency of Russian knowledge	Evaluation of Russian knowledge
“My German is sufficient to attend study courses in German”	Latvians (9), Russians (1), Foreign students (0)	Sufficiency of German knowledge	Evaluation of German knowledge
“My Spanish is sufficient to attend study courses in Spanish”	Latvians (3), Russians (0), Foreign students (0)	Sufficiency of Spanish knowledge	Evaluation of Spanish knowledge
“My Italian is sufficient to attend study courses in Italian”	Latvians (0), Russians (1), Foreign students (0)	Sufficiency of Italian knowledge	Evaluation of Italian knowledge

## Conclusions

- 1) It is important for students to have study courses not only in their native language but also in other languages to enter a modern labour market both locally and internationally;
- 2) English has been considered as a language with the highest status. According to students, English is the most significant language to realize their professional goals. Most students consider their English knowledge sufficient to have study courses in English;
- 3) the Russian language has the second highest language status. It is important to know Russian to integrate into the labour market of Latvia and also communicate with Russian speaking people all over the world. A large number of students

- express willingness to have study courses in Russian. Most students evaluate the knowledge of Russian as sufficient;
- 4) German has the third highest language status. It has been considered as perspective language and Germany has been stated as one of the technically most developed countries in Europe. German is also the third most popular language students would like to have study courses in. However, most students evaluate their knowledge of German as insufficient;
  - 5) students also show interest in less popular languages – Spanish, French, oriental languages (Chinese, Korean, Japanese), Scandinavian languages, etc. They would like to have study courses in these languages. However, the knowledge of these languages has been valued as unsatisfactory;
  - 6) about 50% of Russian students have evaluated their knowledge of Latvian as satisfactory but around 50% of students need to improve their Latvian. Due to the Education Reform of 2004 when 60% of study subjects at minority schools are taught/learned in Latvian, Russian students have got used (successfully or not so successfully) to studying in Latvian. Foreign students do not show interest in studying in Latvian due to their temporary living and studying in Latvia. Latvian students expressed a higher activity to have study courses in Latvian. It could be accounted for the fact they are more used to studying in monolingual environment in comparison with Russian students.

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**Kopsavilkums**

*Globalizācijas apstākļos viens no svarīgākajiem augstskolas uzdevumiem ir nodrošināt tās absolventus ar teicamām valodu zināšanām, veicinot viņu darba karjeras uzsākšanu un attīstību daudz kultūru darba tirgū. Šajā kontekstā ir svarīgi noskaidrot studentu viedokli par iespējām īstenot daudzvalodības politiku augstskolā. Galvenais pētījuma secinājums – studentiem ir nozīmīgi apgūt studiju kursus ne tikai viņu dzimtajā valodā, bet arī citās valodās, lai sekmīgi attīstītu savu profesionālo karjeru.*

**Raksturvārdi:** *valoda, augstskola, daudz kultūru vide, daudzvalodu politika, daudz kultūru darba tirgus.*