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Study finds European resistance to teaching in English

Some University of Hamburg academics fear decline in German scholarship, and believe international students should learn German

July 29, 2017



By [David Matthews \(/author/david-matthews\)](#)

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Source: Alamy

New research has revealed deep “ambivalence” among academics told by European universities to teach and publish in English, with one even threatening to sue his department rather than switch language.

As European continental universities increasingly switch to English for master’s programmes, interviews conducted at the University of Hamburg (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-hamburg>) show that there is resistance to the shift, even though German students are demanding to be taught in English to improve their future job prospects.



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One faculty member told Roger Geertz Gonzalez, a researcher into German higher education at Walden University in the US, that “Germany is Germany and not Britain or America” and refused to teach in English. Another said that he would sue his department for using English, but instead decided to leave.

These are extreme cases, and many faculty were more comfortable with English, but they highlight the language dilemmas facing continental European universities.

“On the one hand they know that it’s the language of business and science, and want to attract international students,” said Dr Gonzalez. On the other hand the rise of English in teaching and research “means that scholarship in the German language will decline”.

Two forces are pushing continental European universities towards English. The first is demand from students: one faculty member had been badgered by his German students to teach in English. “They see it as an opportunity to kind of practise that and use it especially when applying for international job positions inside and outside Germany,” one faculty member told Dr Gonzalez. “And students increasingly appreciate that.”

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The second driver is that faculty can now “forget tenure” unless they publish in English, according to Dr Gonzalez, as German universities need English language publications to help them climb the international university rankings.

One interviewee remarked that his early career work was “senseless” because it had not been published in international journals that affected rankings, according to “Internationalization at a German University: The purpose and paradoxes of English Language”, published in the *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* (<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/IEJ/article/view/10312>).

Susanne Rupp, Hamburg’s vice-president, said that physical science departments at Hamburg were now considering teaching all their master’s programmes in English. “The working language in the labs is English,” she said.

At undergraduate level, however, the university used a mixture of English and German. “You have to learn academic discourse in your mother language first,” and then move to English, Professor Rupp said.

Even in the humanities, the language of research is shifting to English, Professor Rupp said: 30 years ago, musicologists, for example, would have to have read German to understand all the work in their field, but no longer. With the shift to English, preserving German’s distinctive style of academic writing was “problematic”, she said.

Just over 44 per cent of higher education institutions in Germany offered courses taught in English, according to a 2014 survey, *English-Taught Programmes in European Higher Education* (http://www.aca-secretariat.be/fileadmin/aca_docs/images/members/ACA-2015_English_Taught.pdf). The European average is just over a quarter. In the Netherlands, the proportion is over two-thirds, and in Sweden four-fifths.

But the proportion of students in Europe being taught in English remains small, however, at just 1.3 per cent, although this is nearly double what it was in 2007. In Germany, the figure is 1 per cent. Denmark has the biggest slice, at 12.4 per cent.

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