

Leonard Orban

European Commissioner responsible for multilingualism

The Added value of Multilingualism

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Inauguration of the Chair of Multilingualism

Barcelona, 30 November 2007

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my capacity as European Commissioner for multilingualism, I am very pleased to be here in Barcelona. Catalonia is an example of good practice for all of us in Europe. In your communities, Catalan and Spanish thrive alongside each other and multilingualism is encouraged among all citizens.

I am equally pleased to be present today, on the occasion of the launch of the Linguamón - Universitat Oberta de Catalunya Chair in Multilingualism.

As you know, the Commission's Framework strategy for multilingualism, from 2005, emphasised the need to **develop the academic field of multilingualism**, and encouraged universities to introduce chairs in fields related to multilingualism and interculturalism. The creation of a dedicated Chair here today is proof that Member States are serious about promoting multilingualism, and developing higher education provision that meets the needs of today's students.

I would like to congratulate you on your achievement, which is the culmination of a long and fruitful collaboration. For today we can celebrate the inauguration of the Chair in Multilingualism, which you have aptly called a "nexus", facilitating collaboration between leading researchers around the world and creating multi-disciplinary teams to work on different aspects of multilingualism.

This initiative will make an important contribution to developing multilingualism as a discipline in its own right, and I look forward to following your progress.

Languages at the centre of Europe

Since its creation 50 years ago this year, the European Community, and now the European Union, has promoted without pause the languages of its Member States and citizens, and we continue to celebrate the cultural diversity they transmit. Each of the Union's six enlargements has extended also to languages, taking on board new languages and the challenges managing them brings with it. As a practical step, we are creating Field Offices for multilingualism in European capitals. I am pleased to say we have a multilingualism office in Barcelona too, to cater for the needs of Catalonia's citizens.

Year on year, multilingualism - its benefits and its challenges - has gained in profile. In 2003, we adopted the Languages Action Plan for 2004 to 2006 - the first comprehensive policy approach to language teaching and learning across Europe. In 2005, we published a framework strategy on multilingualism. In January this year, I had the honour to be appointed the first Commissioner for multilingualism at the European Commission.

Currently, I and my services are redoubling our efforts to raise the profile of multilingualism on the European stage. My conviction that languages are both a tool and an asset in 21st century Europe has prompted me to consider a new strategy for multilingualism, which I intend to issue next year.

Your initiative, therefore, comes at a strategically opportune moment. It will make a major contribution to furthering the multilingualism cause and meeting the challenges it poses.

Multilingualism a bridge in a changing Europe

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe is changing fast, as we are all aware. More EU nationals than ever are taking advantage of freedom of movement, which is accompanied by new challenges and obligations for receiving countries. We are seeing the number of arrivals from outside the Union increasing, in step with globalisation.

Against this backdrop, multilingualism is the tool for creating bridges between people rather than seeing division. It is the most explicit example of the European Union's motto, 'unity in diversity'. It is a prime channel for developing socially cohesive societies and for raising skills and competitiveness in the knowledge society.

Global world, changing needs - value for the individual

In the past, many learned languages for their intrinsic beauty and to gain access to literature. However, they rarely had the opportunity to speak them. This is not the case today. The world has changed completely in this respect. One doesn't have to travel to use a foreign language. We have daily access and exposure on our doorstep, or keyboard. Through technologies, one has access from home to TV, radio and web sites in any number of languages. In addition, we travel more, for work or for leisure, for family reasons. It becomes ever more important to function in more than one language.

Migration is also having a direct impact on the need for multilingualism throughout the EU, since migrants extend from our metropolitan areas to the most remote rural areas in our Member States.

In our local communities, therefore, multilingualism has become a normal feature of society. Every EU citizen benefits from knowing more than one language, in their daily lives and in relations with their neighbours, colleagues and friends. The European Commission suggests, and Member States agree, that all Europeans aspire to mastering two languages, in addition to their mother tongue. May I say, the citizens of Barcelona are leading the way.

Next year is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Given that languages and intercultural skills are so inextricably linked, I have created a High Level Group of Intellectuals, chaired by Amin Maalouf, to advise me on the contribution of multilingualism to intercultural dialogue, as part of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 and beyond. The Group should make recommendations on how languages can open doors for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding in the European Union.

Added value for society and the economy

Multilingualism promotes a 'healthy economy', and particularly in this competitive world of global markets, languages mean business. I am happy to say that, since taking up my 'chair' in multilingualism, we are increasingly getting business on board to champion languages in the workplace.

Early this year, we published a study which showed that companies, particularly small and medium-sized companies, are losing out because a lack of language skills stops them from attracting new business, whether in Europe or more widely. We must act to reduce this skills gap!

Our challenge is to get the message across to business and to education that languages have an economic impact, and to arm companies and individuals with the language tools and strategies for success.

So, at a conference on languages and business in September, we brought together business, language providers and regional and local actors, to discuss how best to promote languages in business and how to meet companies' needs. There is a great deal of good practice out there, and the conference was a first time for education providers and business to share their views and experience.

I have set up a Business Forum to continue this work. The forum will give us recommendations on language strategies for boosting the competitiveness of companies and improving the employability and mobility of workers; and on raising awareness about the benefits of multilingualism.

Expectations from the chair in multilingualism

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to share with you some of our expectations and hopes for the Chair in Multilingualism. What can its contribution be for the Open University and its students, and more widely?

Our 2005 Communication underlines the "need for national plans to give coherence and direction to actions to promote multilingualism". Here in Barcelona, you are certainly taking up the gauntlet.

The Chair being inaugurated today will be highly beneficial for the University. Its immediate impact will be to:

- Promote languages among students and staff throughout this university and the higher education sector in Catalonia, and its partner institutions worldwide
- Enhance choice of studies
- Improve teacher training and
- Further research in this hitherto under-developed field.

In addition, the chair is well-placed to encourage multilingualism in a holistic way, through coordinating activities across all relevant faculties of the university, and in so doing have knock-on effects. For example, in cooperation with the teacher training department it can work to ensure that in the future, no young graduate teachers come into the profession of language teaching without having spent a period of immersion in a country where the language they teach is spoken. The universities' graduate teachers can be prepared to participate in CLIL - Content and Language Integrated Learning.

Universities across Europe are more and more placing themselves as actors within society, sending out the message that they are relevant to society, to the labour market. Dialogue with business will allow you to share your languages expertise with the business world, to help them meet their language needs.

I welcome in particular your plans to design an International Master in Multilingualism Management. This will enhance the offer of studies in this field. Your dissemination and research will complement the work we are doing at European level.

Your intentions to embed the Chair in an international setting are most welcome. We hope that your plans to create a European Network of Chairs in Multilingualism will come to fruition in 2008.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you every success with this new and exciting endeavour.