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Short bio:

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Paper

Title: Improving language education through quality assurance - project management and language evaluation

Abstract

Quality assurance in language education is a key issue that resonates with broader challenges inherent in higher education. This article examines the evolution and current state of quality assurance in language education at the University of Warsaw, with reference to comparisons with other members of the 4EU+ Alliance.

The analysis focuses on key areas, including language standards for quality assurance, the structure and organisation of language teaching, and regulations for both teachers and students, as well as teacher evaluation and student assessment. This article examines the language programmes offered by the University of Warsaw, the languages available, and the availability of language certificates and exams.

The importance of coordinating a consistent language policy across faculties is highlighted, as this is a key aspect of the effective implementation and evaluation of quality assurance measures. The article explains the benefits of a solid quality assurance system, including increased transparency, uniformity of educational standards and increased student mobility. Additionally, the article delves into the challenges of matching different levels of language proficiency to academic programmes and cooperation within the 4EU+ Alliance.

Introduction

Quality assurance in language education is an important issue that is intertwined with the broader challenges facing higher education institutions worldwide. As universities strive to meet global standards, the University of Warsaw offers an interesting case study of quality assurance practices in language education. This article describes how the management of foreign language education is organized at the University, presents which entities are centrally responsible for organizing foreign language courses, what actions are taken to ensure the best possible quality of language education, and how students and teachers are evaluated. Finally, a brief overview of foreign language education at other universities within the 4EU+ alliance is presented.

Quality assurance in the University of Warsaw language learning

Quality assurance is maintained internally through effective management and leadership, as well as through assessment and self-assessment processes, and externally via quality control. These procedures encompass a variety of methods, including observation frameworks, long-term professional development programs, staff evaluation systems, data collection and feedback mechanisms, and assessments of methodologies and materials. Additionally, they involve benchmarking and innovation policies. The quality assurance system for education at the University of Warsaw is specified in the Statute and within the system, the following operate¹:

- 1) the University Board for Teaching and Learning²,
- 2) the teaching councils,
- 3) teams working for the quality of education established by the Rector.

The quality system at the University of Warsaw includes measures to ensure educational quality in several key areas. These measures involve approving, monitoring, and periodically reviewing teaching programs and their outcomes, as well as assessing students and doctoral candidates. Additionally, the system ensures the quality of the teaching staff and oversees the monitoring, reviewing, and enhancement of learning resources such as libraries and computers with Internet access. It also includes support measures for students and doctoral candidates, like academic supervision or counseling. Furthermore, the system involves collecting, analyzing, and utilizing information about education within the unit using tools like the USOS system and publishing educational information within the unit.

In language learning units, evaluation procedures include quality assessment (measuring achievement in a specific subject or skill area), internal quality assurance (internally agreed and implemented procedures to uphold high standards), external quality assurance or quality control (established procedures to validate standards externally), and accreditation (formal recognition indicating compliance with quality standards).

The resolutions of the University Board for Teaching and Learning of University of Warsaw specify the method of ensuring the quality of education in language education and language teaching and learning for example language teachers are typically observed once a year, feedback surveys are conducted during and after each language course, and staff evaluations occur at least annually. Guidelines for quality assurance specific to language courses should be applied when developing, executing, and evaluating their quality assurance policies and procedures. These guidelines are also to be used in the design, implementation, and review of curricula, syllabuses, and course programs or work schemes, ensuring they align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), established by the Council of Europe, aims to unify educational and cultural approaches to foreign language learning among its Member States, enhancing transparency and consistency in modern language education across Europe. Officially released in 2001, the CEFR outlines what language learners need to master to use a foreign language effectively. This framework provides a shared foundation for language learning curricula, qualifications, textbooks, exams, and syllabuses throughout European countries. It follows an action-oriented approach to language learning and usage, categorizing proficiency into six levels. The

¹ <https://monitor.uw.edu.pl/Lists/Uchway/Attachments/5111/M.2019.357.Zarz.163.pdf>

² <https://urk.uw.edu.pl/>

CEFR also offers a detailed analysis of the tasks proficient language users must perform to communicate effectively, along with the necessary knowledge and skills they need to employ³.

The CEFR describes six proficiency levels for foreign language learning. The first levels are A1 and A2 and called the levels of a 'basic user', B1 and B2 are the levels of an 'Independent user', and people who command C1 and C2 are considered 'Proficient Users'. These level descriptions are described according to the underlining action-oriented approach of the creators of the CEFR.⁴ This approach views learners and users of foreign languages as members of a society who accomplish tasks in certain circumstances and within social contexts. For that reason the level descriptions are outlined in a can-do statement. The so-called can-do-statements describe what a learner should be able to do in effectively communicating at the determined CEFR level. Besides the general descriptions for each CEFR level, the 'can-do-statements' are described for five different skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing at each stage of their linguistic development. The performance of each student is measured against thoroughly researched and universally agreed descriptors which play the role of common standards. The process represents a shift towards criterion-based assessment where learners' achievements are judged in relation to standards and not their peers.

Management of language teaching and learning

1. University System of Language Provision – an innovative project in language teaching and learning

At the University of Warsaw, the organisation of foreign language teaching, learning and the improvement of foreign language proficiency is ensured by the University of Warsaw System of Language Provision - USLP⁵ (in Polish: Uniwersytecki System Nauczania Języków Obcych USNJO). The system is also referred to as The University Foreign Language Teaching System – UFLTS.⁶ The USLP in 2012 was distinguished by the European Union with the European Language Label of the Labels award – a European mark of innovative approach in language teaching and learning. The focus of USLP activities is the teaching of foreign languages through language courses and the organization of language proficiency certification. This involves acquiring language and intercultural competencies in accordance with the CEFR standards, which form the basis for the language proficiency certification process.

The Coordinator of USLP works closely with the University Council for the Coordination of Foreign Language Teaching and Language Proficiency Certification to jointly develop the language policy at the University of Warsaw. This involves suggesting relevant university regulations, providing information, and offering advice. The coordinator is responsible for organizing the University System for Foreign Language Teaching by compiling and publishing the language course offerings through USOS. Additionally, the coordinator manages financial transactions between the university's budget and the units responsible for conducting language courses and other educational entities. The coordinator also oversees student and doctoral entitlements by distributing and tracking tokens for language courses and exams⁷.

The University Council for the Coordination of Foreign Language Teaching and Language Proficiency Certification is tasked with developing and implementing the University's languages policy. It is responsible for overseeing the process of language proficiency certification (which includes developing the written exams, selecting materials for the oral exams, agreeing the assessment criteria, and training test developers and examiners). The University Council is also responsible for ensuring the overall quality of language education at the University (i.e., developing curricula and coordinating the offer of language courses each academic year). The Council is appointed by the Rector of the University of Warsaw for a 4-year term. Members of the Council are drawn from the language teaching units at the University.⁸

³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes//2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET\(2013\)495871\(SUM01\)_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes//2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET(2013)495871(SUM01)_EN.pdf)

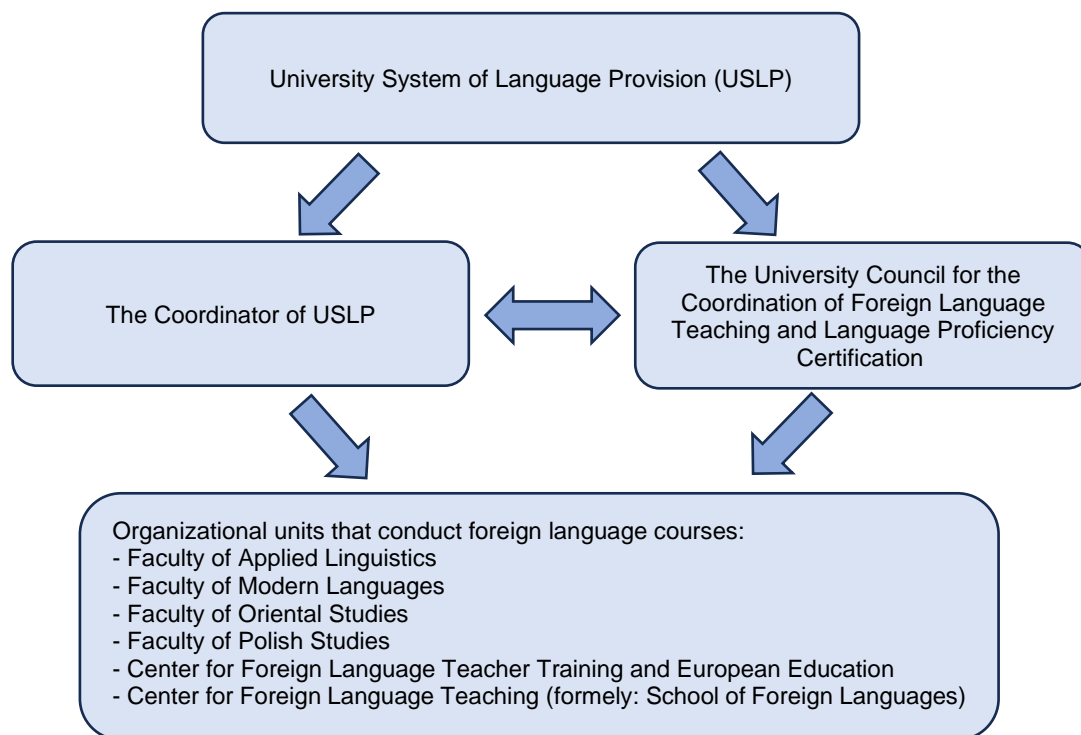
⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

⁵ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/coordinator-for-the-university-system-of-language-provision-usnjo/>

⁶ <https://monitor.uw.edu.pl/Lists/Uchway/Attachments/6050/M.2021.285.U.103%20EN.pdf>

⁷ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/coordinator-for-the-university-system-of-language-provision-usnjo/>

⁸ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/who-are-we/>



Graph 1. University System of Language Provision (own elaboration based on the legal acts of the University of Warsaw)

2. Language courses offered as part of the USLP

Depending on their needs and interests, students are free to choose any language course at any CEFR level offered as part of the The University System of Language Provision (USLP) and gain credit for the course. Every student has the opportunity to take advantage of 240 hours of language classes. The University of Warsaw offers language classes in 41 languages in the winter semester of 2024/25 taught by university units covering all world language families and Polish Sign Language⁹:

- | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Arabic | 24. Macedonian |
| 2. Armenian | 25. Mongolian |
| 3. Azerbaijani | 26. Dutch |
| 4. Belarusian | 27. Norwegian |
| 5. Bulgarian | 28. Pashto |
| 6. Chinese | 29. Persian |
| 7. Croatian | 30. Polish Sign Language |
| 8. Czech | 31. Portuguese |
| 9. Dari | 32. Romanian |
| 10. English | 33. Russian |
| 11. Finnish | 34. Serbian |
| 12. French | 35. Slovak |
| 13. Georgian | 36. Spanish |
| 14. German | 37. Swahili |
| 15. Greek | 38. Swedish |
| 16. Hebrew | 39. Turkish |
| 17. Hindi | 40. Ukrainian |
| 18. Hungarian | 41. Vietnamese |
| 19. Italian | |
| 20. Japanese | |
| 21. Kazakh | |
| 22. Korean | |
| 23. Lithuanian | |

⁹ <https://rejestracja.usos.uw.edu.pl/catalogue.php?rg=0000-2024Z-LEKTORATY&lang=en>

A condition for completing studies or education at the University of Warsaw is the mastery of a chosen language at the appropriate level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, hereinafter referred to as 'CEFR' – in the case of:

- 1) undergraduate students – at least B2;
- 2) graduate and integrated master's students – at least B2+;
- 3) doctoral candidates – at least B2¹⁰.

Language courses are conducted in various formats: traditional in-class sessions, partially or fully online. Each format adheres to the same learning outcomes, although the methods for assessing their achievement may differ. In addition to the aforementioned learning formats, students can take advantage of individual consultations during teachers' office hours. Language teachers are also prepared to conduct individual sessions with students with disabilities, upon request from the Office for Persons with Disabilities at University of Warsaw.

The grading criteria for students as established by the Council include a few key components that contribute to the final grade. The conditions for obtaining credit in traditional in-class language courses, blended courses (partially online), and e-courses (predominantly online) vary¹¹. The differences reflect the diverse teaching methodologies and learning environments associated with each format. Components in traditional in-class language courses and their respective weightings are:

1. Active Participation in Classes: This accounts for 25% of the final grade. It emphasizes the importance of being engaged and contributing during class sessions.
2. Test Results and Homework: Together, these also make up 25% of the final grade. This component assesses the students' understanding and application of the material through regular testing and assignments.
3. Final Exam: The most significant single component, the final exam constitutes 50% of the final grade. It evaluates the students' comprehensive understanding of the course material. To successfully pass the semester, students need to achieve a positive grade in all these components. The grading scale used to convert percentage scores into grades is as follows:

99 – 100% – 5+ (A+)

93 – 98% – 5 (A)

87 – 92% – 4+ (B+)

77 – 86% – 4 (B)

71 – 76% – 3+ (C+)

60 – 70% – 3 (C)

This structured approach ensures that students are evaluated on a balanced mix of participation, ongoing assessment, and final examination performance¹².

3. Language Certification

Language certification exams at the University of Warsaw cover forty languages from all language groups worldwide. They are conducted at 5 proficiency levels according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). All full-time and part-time (evening) undergraduate students are required to pass a foreign language certificate examination at B2 level or above. Students who hold one of the language certificates specified in the Council's Resolution are exempt from taking a University certificate examination¹³. In accordance with the Rector of the University of Warsaw's Regulation, regarding the organisational principles of teaching and certifying foreign languages at the University, completion of first-cycle studies and long-cycle studies is dependent on mastering one foreign language at B2 level or above according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This requirement can be fulfilled by taking a Certificate exam offered by the University of Warsaw or by presenting an external language certificate recognised by the University.

Students of the University of Warsaw, as well as individuals from outside the university, can take an examination, upon which a language proficiency certificate is issued. This document certifies mastery of the given foreign language in speaking and writing at one of the levels specified according to the guidelines of the Council of Europe. The document can serve as proof of foreign language proficiency

¹⁰ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/general-regulations/>

¹¹ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=3682

¹² <http://sjw.uw.edu.pl/en/for-students/>

¹³ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/88/2023/06/Resolution-No-8-1.pdf>

when applying for studies, foreign internships, or jobs. In 2023, 3,860 students passed the foreign language certification exam at the B1, B2, C1, or C2 level¹⁴.

Regulations of the Quality Assurance and Language Evaluation

In addition to the The University Council for the Coordination of Foreign Language Teaching and Language Proficiency Certification, each unit, which conducts language courses, namely the Faculty of Applied Linguistics, the Faculty of Modern Languages, the Faculty of Oriental Studies, the Faculty of Polish Studies, the Center for Foreign Language Teacher Training and European Education, and the Centre for Foreign Language Teaching, has its own internal regulations ensuring the quality of language instruction. The regulations of the Centre for Foreign Language Teaching, which educates the largest number of students at the University of Warsaw, encompass several key areas of internal quality assurance. These regulations include conducting internal monitoring and reviews of the framework language courses and learning outcomes, as well as ensuring and improving the quality of the teaching process. They emphasize motivating both teachers and students, and involve the verification of learning outcomes and language proficiency. Additionally, the regulations focus on reviewing and supplementing equipment in classrooms and library resources to support the learning environment. They also involve updating the educational offerings and internal documentation related to the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, these regulations promote the activities of the Centre for Foreign Language Teaching within the academic community to enhance its visibility and engagement¹⁵.

Additionally, the Quality Assurance Team has been established to work directly with the Director of the School of Foreign Languages (now: Centre for Foreign Language Teaching)¹⁶. The primary aim of this team is to advise and support the Director in enhancing quality. They achieve this by actively participating in creating high-quality education at the university, fostering a culture of quality among staff, and developing an internal system to ensure and improve language education quality. The team accomplishes its goals by internally reviewing foreign language curricula and learning outcomes, observing language classes, and supporting language teachers with information on quality assurance and professional development opportunities. They also encourage cooperation based on mutual respect within language teachers community, work with Student and PhD Student Councils of the University of Warsaw, analyze student support systems, update educational offerings, and recommend ways to improve education quality. Class observations are conducted following the procedure outlined on the Centre for Foreign Language Teaching website, using observation sheets tailored to the type of class. Students evaluate foreign language courses midway through the course and after the courses has ended.

Language learning among members of the 4EU+ Alliance

The 4EU+ European University Alliance is a transnational strategic association of Charles University in Prague, Heidelberg University, Paris-Panthéon-Assas University, Sorbonne University in Paris, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Geneva, the University of Milan, and the University of Warsaw. The 4EU+ Alliance has one vision: to create one comprehensive research-intensive European University through a new quality of cooperation in teaching, education, research and administration¹⁷.

All universities within the 4EU+ Alliance align their language education quality and proficiency level assessments with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This alignment is crucial for the development of joint courses for students across the Alliance. Each institution has established a system to ensure the quality of language teaching. Additionally, every university conducts evaluations of language courses through surveys completed by students at the end of each course. These surveys assess various aspects, including the performance of language instructors, classroom facilities, and course curricula. The results of these surveys are reviewed, and insights are drawn to develop strategies for quality enhancement. All universities offer the opportunity to take language proficiency exams that certify foreign language skills. Additionally, some universities provide the chance to take external international exams such as TOEFL, CELI, DAAD, DELE, and CELPE for instance, in the heiSKILLS Competence and Language Centre at Heidelberg University.

¹⁴ <https://www.uw.edu.pl/ksztalcenie/oferta-jezykowa/>

¹⁵ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=3623&lang=en

¹⁶ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=189&lang=en

¹⁷ <https://4euplus.eu/4EU-1.html>

There are notable differences in the criteria for assessing foreign language learning among the universities. However, for joint courses, a syllabus is created to standardize criteria for participants from all 4EU+ universities. Students enrolled in these shared courses are informed in advance of the requirements, which are published and accessible on the 4EU+ student platform¹⁸ and on the university website that leads the respective course. Another difference lies in the number of language course hours allocated per student. Some universities, such as the University of Warsaw, provide the same number of hours regardless of the study program. In contrast, other universities, like the University of Copenhagen, adjust the number of hours based on the field of study (e.g., programs focusing on specific world regions receive more language instruction hours). Furthermore, the structure of language teaching management varies: some have central units managing language education, such as SIAL, a language learning service at the Sorbonne University and heiSKILLS Competence and Language Centre at the Heidelberg University. In contrast, other, like Charles University in Prague, assign language teaching to specific departments. Language courses also differ in the number of ECTS assigned, as not all universities have uniform guidelines in this regard. This variation reflects the individual autonomy of each institution within the alliance to determine the credit value of their language courses, which can influence the workload and academic recognition of these courses across different universities.

Conclusions

Over the past decade, the University of Warsaw's system of language teaching has been continuously developed and improved. Important achievements include the standardisation and unification of assessment criteria for both students and teachers. Student evaluation surveys are carried out at the end of each semester, and teachers are regularly observed in class. A comprehensive training system for teachers has been established and is managed by the Training Section of the Human Resources Office. These training sessions cover topics such as the use of modern technology in education and working with people with disabilities. An additional advantage is the extensive collection of foreign language literature available at the University of Warsaw Library. Despite this progress, there are ongoing challenges, such as developing a motivational system for students to increase engagement and for staff to encourage the development and updating of skills. Another issue frequently reported by language teachers is inadequate infrastructure, particularly in historic buildings where classrooms and equipment are not suitable for the use of modern technology in teaching. For less widely taught and oriental languages, the 240 hours of teaching allocated are insufficient to reach the required B2 level.

Collaboration within the 4EU+ Alliance makes it possible to organise language courses that are comparable across institutions, thanks to the common system CEFR. The most significant differences between the universities in the Alliance are the number of hours and ECTS credits allocated to foreign language courses. In summary, all universities in the Alliance have general regulations and procedures to ensure the quality of education. However, some universities, have additional resolutions and internal regulations that deal specifically with quality of language teaching. Overall, the situation and regulations concerning the quality of language teaching at the University of Warsaw and other universities in the Alliance appear robust. Although the range of languages offered and the number of teaching hours vary, each institution recognizes the importance of foreign language skills, which contribute to the internationalization of both students and the university itself.

References:

- ¹ <https://monitor.uw.edu.pl/Lists/Uchway/Attachments/5111/M.2019.357.Zarz.163.pdf>
- ² <https://urk.uw.edu.pl/>
- ³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes//2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET\(2013\)495871\(SUM01\)_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes//2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET(2013)495871(SUM01)_EN.pdf)
- ⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>
- ⁵ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/coordinator-for-the-university-system-of-language-provision-usnjo/>
- ⁶ <https://monitor.uw.edu.pl/Lists/Uchway/Attachments/6050/M.2021.285.U.103%20EN.pdf>
- ⁷ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/coordinator-for-the-university-system-of-language-provision-usnjo/>
- ⁸ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/who-are-we/>
- ⁹ <https://rejestracja.usos.uw.edu.pl/catalogue.php?rg=0000-2024Z-LEKTORATY&lang=e>
- ¹⁰ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/en/general-regulations/>
- ¹¹ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=3682
- ¹² <http://sjw.uw.edu.pl/en/for-students/>
- ¹³ <https://jezyki.obce.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/88/2023/06/Resolution-No-8-1.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://sp.4euplus.eu/courses>(<https://sp.4euplus.eu/courses>)

¹⁴ <https://www.uw.edu.pl/ksztalcenie/oferta-jezykowa/>

¹⁵ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=3623&lang=en

¹⁶ https://szjo.uw.edu.pl/?page_id=189&lang=en

¹⁷ <https://4euplus.eu/4EU-1.html>

¹⁸ <https://sp.4euplus.eu/courses>](<https://sp.4euplus.eu/cours>