

香港浸會大學教職員工會
Hong Kong Baptist University Faculty and Staff Union

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NEWSLETTER (169)

Institutional Language Policy

December 4, 2006

Dear colleagues,

We write to clarify our position on the University's policy concerning the medium of instruction and reiterate our long-standing request for genuine consultation before the university makes any important decision. Given the present circumstances, we are also obliged to call for a review of the policy as soon as possible with participation by all stakeholders.

What we care about

We never doubt the Senate's good intention of adopting English as the medium of instruction while the use of other languages needs to be justified. But we are much concerned whether faculty members as well as other stakeholders have been fully consulted. We do not mean the university has never tried to consult faculty members, but we doubt the Senate's effectiveness in running a university-wide consultation. By writing one or two circulars asking academic unit heads to hold discussions on the issue, the Senate has refrained from consulting faculty members directly, widely and proactively.

As we understand, many academic departments had not held any meeting on the proposed policy before its passage by the Senate on 26th May 2003. Some colleagues aired their views in a faculty meeting, which was convened only after the Senate had given its blessing, according to the minutes of the faculty concerned. On other occasions, some colleagues expressed opposition to the proposed policy during departmental meetings but they were countered with the question of how to implement the language policy in question.

What are the problems?

The above incidents illustrate that the consultation was plagued with problems. This can be confirmed by reading carefully the chronology of events leading to the Senate's decision to adopt English as the major medium of instruction, as provided by the Academic Registrar, Dr. Robert Lam, in his open letter of November 10. It revealed, among other things, the following:

- (1) The policy of using English as the major language of instruction was passed in two months' time after it was first considered by the Academic Development Committee on 24th March 2003;
- (2) The proposed language policy was simply a recommendation for adopting English as the medium of instruction without providing detailed justifications or other policy options for consideration;
- (3) Heads of academic departments had been "requested to propose an implementation plan and timetable for submission to the Senate" before any decision was made on the proposed policy;
- (4) The Senate had no plans to organize any discussion among faculty members other than asking department or programme heads to hold their own discussions;
- (5) While heads of academic departments or units were requested to submit a proposal on how to implement the proposed language policy, they need not report on whether faculty members supported the policy before it was passed in the Senate;
- (6) There is no indication that the Senate had any idea about how many academic departments had already held discussions on the policy, not to say how many had supported it, before it made a decision.

The above observations prompt us to reflect on the adequacy of various dimensions in the entire process of consultation:

- (1) **The length of the consultation:** Was the period for consultation sufficient for informed discussion, particularly when we were in the high tide of the SARS crisis?
- (2) **The quality of the proposal:** Did the proposal for the language policy, which was circulated for consultation, contain facts and arguments supporting the proposal and defending it against potential opposing views? Why wasn't any consultation paper that contained alternatives to the proposed policy prepared for consideration?
- (3) **The focus of consultation:** Wasn't the consultation confusing as we were requested of a plan for implementing the proposed policy almost the same time when heads of academic units were asked to hold discussions on the policy? Did the request to submit an implementation plan to the Senate signify that the proposed policy was already a foregone conclusion?
- (4) **The coverage and means of consultation:** Why didn't the Senate solicit faculty members' views by direct means such as questionnaire surveys, discussion groups, or forum? If the Senate meant to rely on intermediary units to solicit opinions, why didn't they make sure that each academic unit would consult its faculty and report the results to the Senate?
- (5) **Grounds for decision-making:** On what grounds did the Senate come to accept the proposed policy? In the absence of a systematic way of soliciting opinions from colleagues and presenting them publicly, could the Senate be confident to say that the policy had passed with the general support of the teaching faculty?
- (6) **The importance of public opinions and consensus:** What was the role of public opinions and consensus in making such an important policy when open consultation

meetings were lacking, questionnaire surveys not taken, and departmental discussions requested but not required? Did the university care about what we are thinking on the issue?

Given that the consultation had been based on a proposal with substandard quality, directed to an ambiguous agenda, done in a haste, unable to seek consensus, and lacking a clear ground for decision, we reckon that such an opinion-gathering exercise, called consultation or not, would only lead us to displeasure, confusion, and misjudgment. Teaching effectiveness and the quality of education in general has been compromised.

What is to be done

To regenerate morale and support to the language policy, we need to re-launch the consultation exercise. It means the university must fully consult faculty members as well as other stakeholders by well-established methods before making any important decision. They include, but are not limited to, disseminating relevant information, providing options for consideration, soliciting responses from stakeholders, enhancing communication among all parties concerned, explaining the grounds for policy decisions, and valuing participation by all stakeholders throughout the entire consultation process. This ideal of deliberative consultation is not only desirable but also practicable in an academic community that treasures “academics governing university.” We also pledge we will make our best efforts to cooperate with the administration to make it work.

Right now, we have not committed ourselves to adopting English or Chinese as the major language of instruction. But we are fully committed to upholding the high principles of transparency, openness, and accountability in university governance. In a nutshell, we will respect the policy decision, whatever it is, if it is based on the consensus of our colleagues fostered by informed exchanges in the collegial process of consultation.

Regards,

Executive Committee

Hong Kong Baptist University Faculty And Staff Union