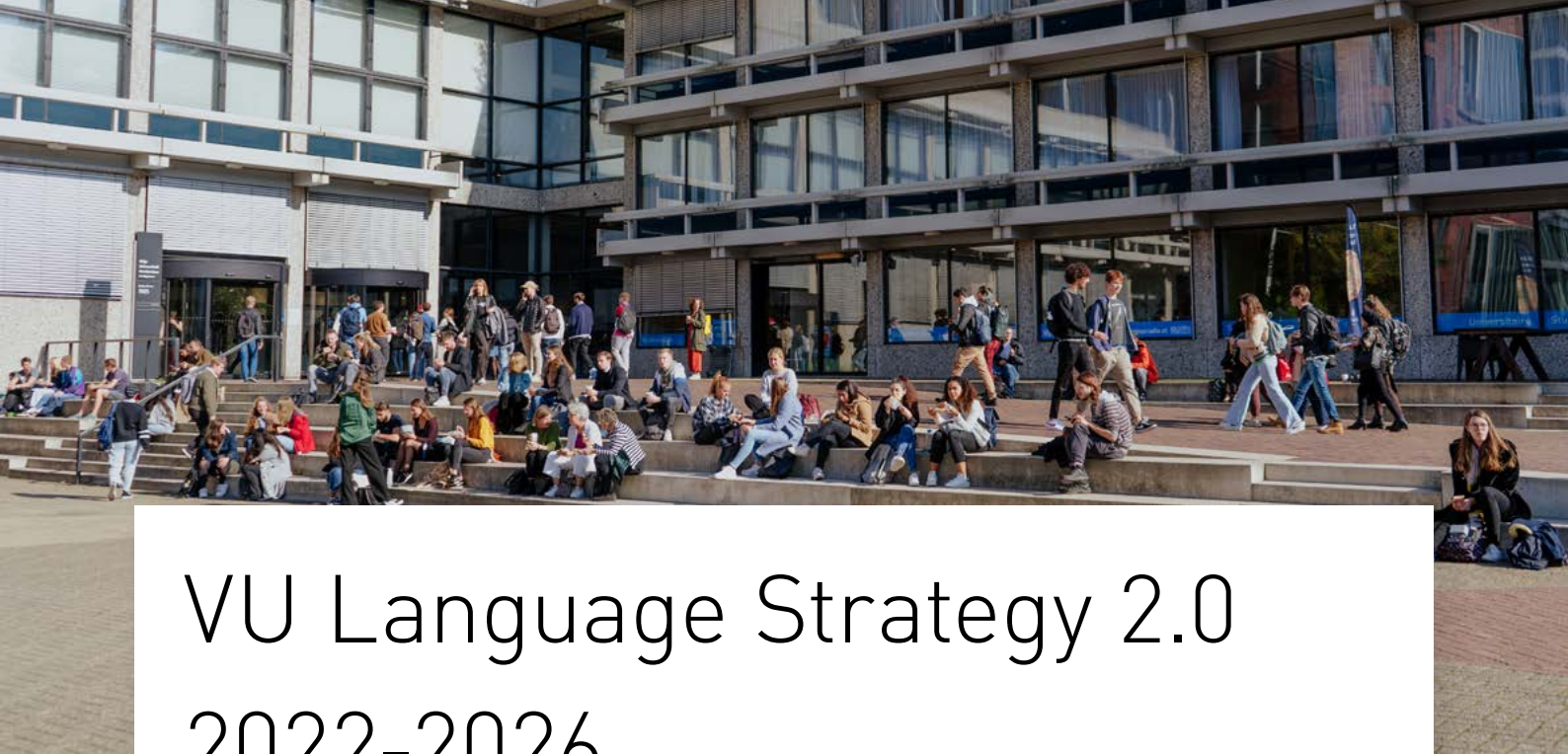


Enhancing a multilingual and multicultural campus

VU Language Strategy 2.0, 2022-2026





VU Language Strategy 2.0

2022-2026

This VU Language Strategy 2.0 document proposes five policy lines which seek to enrich the unique language diversity of our academic community. The policy lines differ in terms of the goals to be achieved and the approach to be taken.

Whereas the first two focus on improvement of our bilingual environment and education by anticipating and implementing upcoming legislation (Wet Taal en Toegankelijkheid), the other three are much broader in their scope in that they explicitly address diversity, and aim to enhance multilingualism and multiculturalism on our campus. Overall, this policy approach seeks to make optimum use of the intellectual and cultural possibilities of multilingualism, and to celebrate the different languages and cultures on the VU campus. In so doing, it expands our focus to include new themes, such as the power of languages, the importance of language research, the different ways in which languages are used, and the relation between language and culture.

This is a framework document for VU Language Strategy 2.0. In 2018 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) adopted and implemented its first Language Policy, which aimed to strengthen VU as a bilingual university, with Dutch and English on an equal footing. Funding was made available to implement this Language Policy. It was used in order to develop courses, install peer-review mechanisms and create other options for students and staff to learn a new language or improve their English or Dutch language skills. This gave them the opportunity to function adequately in the emerging bilingual environment (education, research, focus on administrative work, employee and student participation).

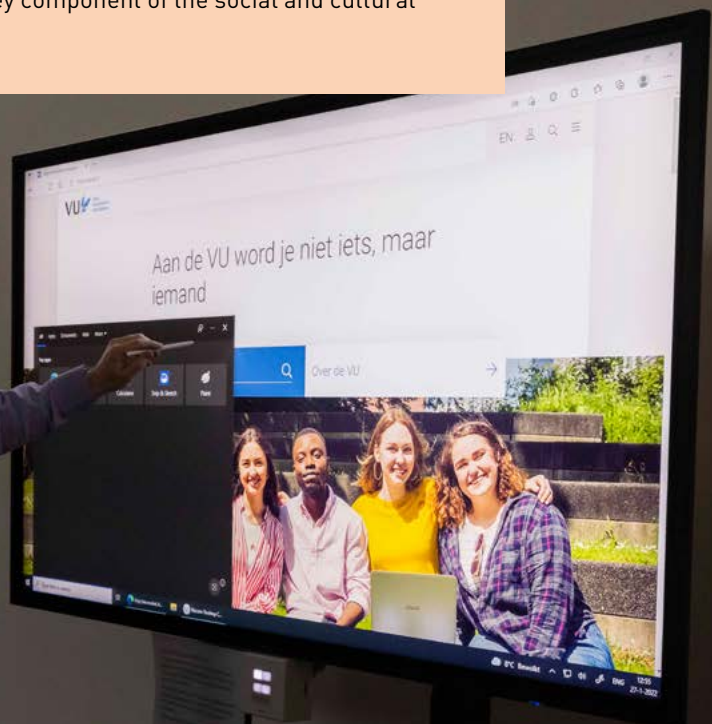
The 2021 evaluation of this Language Policy argued that it had indeed contributed to the internationalization of the staff and student community, as well as to international collaboration in research and education. The evaluation also made suggestions for improvement. Meanwhile, however, rapid internationalization has also changed the composition of the VU community, and the university has developed a new policy framework with respect to diversity and inclusion. Additionally, language use in university education has become a high-profile policy issue with new legislation in preparation, and with politics pushing universities to be more active in educating future teachers and enhancing language teaching (reading, writing, communication) in secondary education. These developments demand a broader language strategy beyond the initial single focus on English and Dutch proficiency (which in itself is quite an achievement).


In terms of procedure we have discussed this framework document in the relevant governing bodies and based on the feedback received we are installing a project group with support staff and academics to develop these policy lines further. In the final stage of development we will also draft (or redesign the existing) funding mechanisms needed to support the strategy. We propose that from the start a communications strategy – including debates and/or blog posts – be developed in order to make this next level Language Strategy an interactive part of the enhancement of the international academic community that VU has become.

What follows is a brief elaboration of the five policy lines.

Starting from these developments, we propose to refocus, or rather broaden VU's Language Strategy along the following five policy lines:

1. Further enhancing bilingualism (Dutch/English) in our internal governance structures and communication channels.
2. Strengthening (narrowing and widening) our focus on languages in education, while respecting/anticipating the new legislation.
3. Establishing cross-overs between language policies, VU education at all levels, and VU ambitions to honour diversity, promote equal opportunities, raise language awareness and foster the enjoyment of reading.
4. Broadening the interaction between academic research on language, communication and citizenship, and the major societal challenges related to language.
5. Turning the existing language diversity into a key component of the social and cultural campus.





1. Enhancing bilingualism (Dutch /English) in our internal governance structures and communication channels

VU is a Dutch university in Amsterdam, attracting many international students, staff and visitors/fellows, as it has a wide range of educational and research programmes in English and participates in many international networks. As a result, VU is a bilingual university, where we use both English and Dutch in official communication. While some international students and staff may expect an entirely English speaking environment, English is actually best seen as the lingua franca in a multilingual environment. At VU we offer opportunities for students and staff to learn English or Dutch where necessary, so as to make sure that everyone can participate in university life.

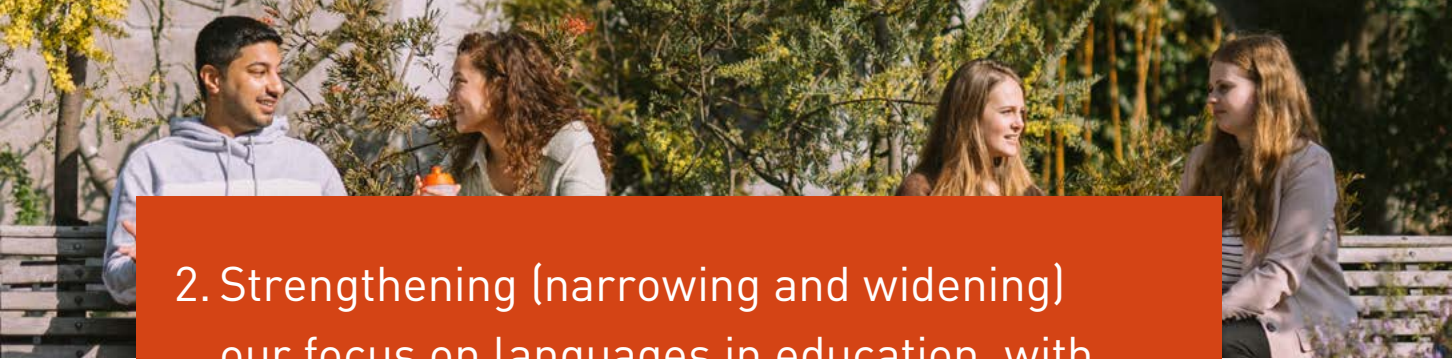
The language policy evaluation of spring 2021 shows that not all students and staff understand or agree with the rationale behind a bilingual university.¹ Some will argue that at an international university everyone should be able to communicate in English, whereas others will feel a need to focus on the Dutch language, as we are a Dutch university in the Netherlands. Both arguments are valid, and we need to adopt a practical approach in order to make sure that everyone is included in our policies.

Activities designed to enhance bilingualism have received funding from the so called 'Kwaliteitsgelden'. This funding is available until 2024 and the following activities will be continued and updated during this period. In short:

- Promoting the bilingual language policy with respect to internal communication and participatory bodies. This requires an explicit explanation of the value of both English and Dutch as our contact languages, and should be aimed at incoming international students and staff, so that everyone knows what to expect.
- Consolidating and implementing the decision that the administrative language at VU is Dutch, unless it has been explicitly agreed that English is used.
- Establishing, at the start of a new series of (participatory) meetings, whether Dutch or English is to be the main language, and how best to support those who wish to use the other of the two during meetings.

- If needed, using professional interpreters in official meetings so that all participants can choose to speak either Dutch or English.
- Setting up a clear translation policy within VU, which clarifies which texts are to be professionally translated, and which terminology is to be used. This policy will also need to address facilitating the use of DeepL Pro translator, where relevant, for the instant translation of policy documents and other communication. We should consider how to recruit students from the VU Master's *programme Communicatie- en Informatiewetenschappen: Schrijven en vertalen* or similar programmes at other universities to work as translators/editors in the role of student assistant .
- Strengthening training opportunities in language proficiency as part of human resource management: identifying staff within administrative teams who guarantee that new staff receive language training in both languages within such teams if necessary.
- Allowing incoming international staff enough time to learn Dutch, offering Dutch courses for international staff and English courses for Dutch staff, free of charge for the staff.
- Further developing the website as an entirely bilingual platform, including a VU terminology policy (Dutch-English).

¹ Nicole Prins (namens regiegroep Taalbeleid), Evaluatie Taalbeleid VU. Mei 2021



2. Strengthening (narrowing and widening) our focus on languages in education, with respect to/anticipating new legislation

New legislation, the [Wet taal en toegankelijkheid \(WTT\)](#), is being prepared, but it is still very unclear whether this will be passed. However, to strengthen VU's own focus and criteria with respect to language support and language as medium of instruction within our educational programmes, we do not need to wait for the formal acceptance (or not) of this law; rather, we just need to take sufficient account of what the WTT intends to achieve.

First of all, the WTT will require that universities explain the rationale for the actual language of instruction for each degree programme, English or Dutch. In the case of a bilingual programme, this rationale can also be applied to its individual modules. We need to have solid arguments to underpin the added value of the chosen language: why English rather than Dutch or vice versa?

As a result of internationalization, many VU programmes, modules or tracks (Bachelor and Master) are now taught in English. The rationale behind this is first of all that having English as the medium of instruction makes it possible to realize a 'mixed classroom' at VU, which offers students an inclusive learning environment and maximizes the value of diversity in education. At the same time it provides an opportunity for the exchange of students with other universities. Secondly, where the research field itself communicates mainly in English, attracting international staff to teach substantial parts of the programme is vital for VU's international positioning. Moreover, many programmes prepare students for an international working environment.

At the same time, Dutch is vital as well. In many programmes it is essential that students have an excellent command of Dutch, for example in the fields of law, medicine, humanities, and social sciences. Many young graduates find positions as professionals in their field, where they may be policy makers, coaches, or social workers, or teachers in secondary education and training institutes etc. The majority of students in these fields follow degree programmes that prepare them for jobs with a great societal impact in a Dutch speaking environment.

Programmes such as medicine and dentistry, which are taught in Dutch, feel a great need for improvement in the Dutch skills of their students so that they can develop their skills as professionals.

Another reason not to wait for the WTT is that we must renew our focus on language support for students. The WTT prescribes that in Bachelor programmes with English as the main language, Dutch and international students will need to have the opportunity to develop their Dutch skills. On the other hand, if Dutch students are in Dutch Bachelor programmes, they will need to have the opportunity to further develop their English, so as to gain access to Master programmes in English. This will need to be facilitated, and incorporated in the learning outcomes of our programmes. In addition, under current legislation, universities already have the legal obligation to teach Dutch language skills to all Dutch students.

VU has an established infrastructure to implement the WTT, and this will be continued. First of all, the necessary expertise to incorporate English language learning trajectories into existing programmes is available from the [Academic Language Programme \(ALP\)](#) in our Faculty of Humanities. The ALP also provides basic Dutch courses for international students, as well as making sure that our university is accessible to students who do not yet have a sufficient command of academic Dutch, but do meet the formal requirements for admission (e.g. refugee students), by offering them a Dutch course at academic level. [Taalcentrum-VU](#) already provides courses on teaching in English for academic staff (who need a certificate at C1 level), as well as administering language tests for students. All students take a test in English or Dutch in their first year, depending on the language of their degree programme, and if they fail they have to follow a language course to improve their skills. Finally, VU also offers language teaching qualifications (Dutch, French, German, English, Latin and Greek) for Bachelor and Master students, which means that we have the relevant expertise in English and Dutch, as well as in several other languages.

We can conclude that in anticipation of the WTT, VU needs to re-establish the focus of its current language policy.

We will need to focus on:

- Updating the [Code of Conduct on Language](#). The current code dates from 2008, and just the date alone suggests that an update is needed. The revised code of conduct will be adjusted in accordance with Language Strategy 2.0, and will serve as the basis for updating faculty language policy across the university.
- Keeping a close eye on developments at the Taalunie, which is currently constructing a set of language competencies for students in Higher Education (for all language acquisition).
- Refocusing on the need to develop and implement policies on developing students' Dutch and English language skills. These will include academic competencies in both languages. A clear policy is necessary on what is needed and how students will be able to acquire these skills.
- Continuing support for Dutch staff to improve their proficiency in teaching in English in a 'mixed classroom' where English is the lingua franca.
- Looking into ways to continue funding (currently 'Kwaliteitsgelden', until 2024), so as to make sure that there is long-term coverage for existing and new initiatives undertaken by the Academic Language Programme and Taalcentrum VU.





3. Establishing cross-overs between language policies, VU education at all levels (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate education), and VU ambitions with respect to diversity, equal opportunities, language awareness and the enjoyment of reading

As a diverse community, VU University plays an important role in society with regard to the meaning of language diversity. In the context of internationalization, the initial focus of the Language Strategy (2008) prioritized the introduction of English as the second contact language. However, with respect to educational standards this focus on English as the second language of instruction and examination is in itself not sufficient. On the one hand, it requires that teaching staff who switch from teaching in Dutch to teaching in English feel confident (as addressed under 2). On the other, it also has an impact on the Dutch and international students from diverse backgrounds for whom English is not their first language, as they may be hesitant to opt for an English programme or track. Moreover, we are well aware of a certain anxiety in society about whether the university's ability to contribute to solving issues in society may suffer from the increasing use of English, leading to a widening gap between the university and the rest of society.²

Broadening the bilingual approach to a new concept of multilingualism can be one of the positive responses to this fear. Many students and staff are well versed in more than one language, as their first language may differ from the language of their education. Students and staff across faculties and disciplines could be encouraged to further develop their 'other' language skills as an aspect of academic personal growth, and move beyond using 'just' English and Dutch. As is discussed in literary texts³, academic language cannot be reduced to a standardized English translation of academic texts from other languages. By asking multilingual students to present in

English academic readings published in their own language in a seminar setting, they will offer the opportunity for other students to broaden their intercultural knowledge and skills. Languages currently spoken on campus include Arab, Berber, Turkish, Chinese, French, Bahasa Indonesia, Russian, Spanish, Sranan, Sarnami and Papiamentu, and it would make sense to make academic research in these language areas accessible to a larger group.

This encouragement of multiple language use in combination with the introduction of new legislation (WTT) offers an opportunity to develop VU University as a really diverse and multilingual 'place to be', a hub where English and Dutch are the main languages to be used, but where other languages and cultures are highly valued as well. Students from diverse backgrounds who come to study at VU University need every opportunity to learn excellent Dutch and English, but also to develop academic skills relevant to their future profession. The exchange of academic knowledge beyond language borders is vital in an multilingual and multicultural environment. Just to be precise, we do not encourage community building along language groups, as this might have a negative effect on cohorts.

Language and culture are connected. It is not only important that students and PhD or Postdoc researchers are encouraged to read academic work and develop their academic language skills in their own language, instead of in translation. Indeed, academic skills also imply that students are aware of the complex relationship between culture and language, so it would be good to challenge them to express academic concepts, findings and insights in their own language and reflect on similarities and differences of meaning that may occur across different languages. Academic skills then not only involve the

² Van Parijs, P., 'Englishization as trap and lifeline' in: R. Wilkinson & R. Gabriëls ed., *The Englishization of Higher Education in Europe* (Amsterdam 2021) 355-369.

³ Gajatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York (Columbia UP) 2003

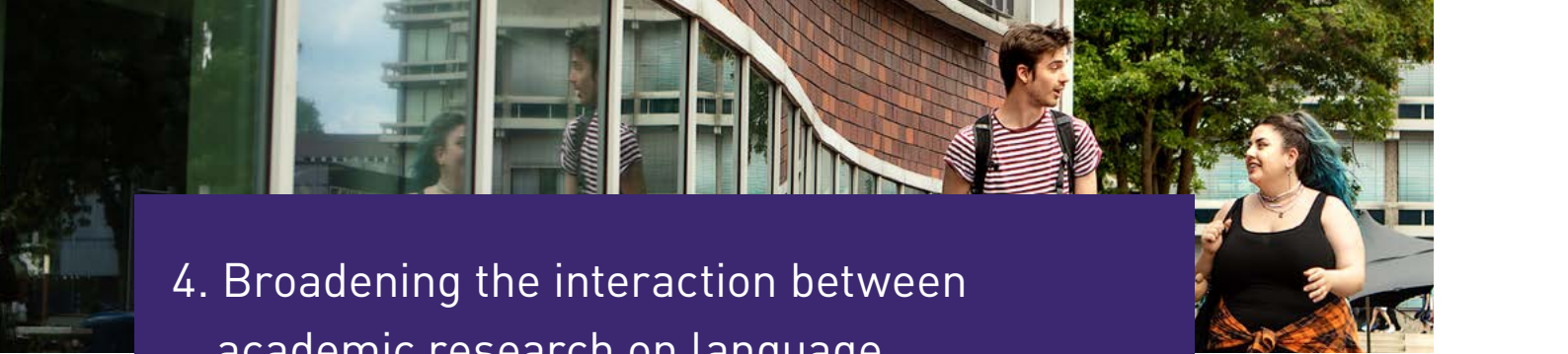
value of interdisciplinarity (which teaches that different academic disciplines have different approaches to one and the same concept), but they also plant the seed for a multilingual awareness, which will contribute to resilience in society. In a wider context this will contribute to a more effective additional benefit for Dutch society concerning the changes in the demographic composition of its population, and in cultural familiarities important for international political and economic relations. The report *Languages for the Netherlands*⁴ recommends that Dutch universities take their role in language and culture education seriously, and develop a hub for language research.

Most expertise with respect to languages can be found in the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Religion and Theology, and the Faculty of Health and Movement studies. Currently an assessment is in progress to take stock of all language expertise that VU has on offer. This is necessary since the university has not only gradually 'lost' a certain focus on general linguistics, but has also economized on language expertise over the past decade (German, Romance languages, Afrikaans, Dutch). The current success of minor programmes such as 'Spanish', the interest in the language components (12 EC) of the recently introduced History and International Studies tracks, as well as the minor in 'Dutch language and literature', show that students are interested in developing their language skills, and it is worth re-establishing our expertise.

In a revised and updated Code of Conduct for language, we should consider leaving room for dedicated use of other languages in our education. Additionally, we recommend that VU consider finding practical ways of adopting a broad, multilingual approach, and that it work together with existing partners such as the Learn! Academy. Already the steering committee for 'Onderwijsprofilering' has been set up to enhance cooperation between the Mixed Classroom concept, a Broader Mind, and Language Strategy. Here are some possibilities that a project group could look into when developing this further:

- Offering more extracurricular courses on 'foreign' languages as an 'extra' within the Broader Mind programme.
- Looking into good practices arising from initiatives such as [Meertaligheid op scholen](#), which starts from comparable ideas in primary and secondary education.
- Providing teaching staff with tool kits to encourage learning across languages, facilitated by incorporating multilingualism into the mixed classroom concept, and encouraging teaching staff to bring other languages into their courses.
- Considering the actual language courses on offer (maybe in collaboration with the Open University, and/or as an aspect of the LLO agenda) allowing intergenerational exchange around shared language interests.

⁴ KNAW (2018). *Talen voor Nederland*, Amsterdam, KNAW.



4. Broadening the interaction between academic research on language, communication and citizenship, and the major societal challenges related to language


The ideas, views, and proposals mentioned here so far are all connected to different aspects of the VU research agendas falling under the profile themes of Connected World and Governance for Society; they can also easily be related to Science for Sustainability and Human Health & Life Sciences. The same connections are made in the new *SSH Sectorplan* and its subproposals with respect to both Humanities and Social Sciences.⁵ This is first and foremost the case at a general level, since all disciplines involved have a communications component, with 'language' as not the only, but certainly as one key factor. Another common aspect concerns knowledge transfer (teaching, learning, reporting, sharing insights etc.), which is not only basic for intergenerational contact (PhD supervision, teaching in schools, preparing immigrants for 'Inburgering' etc.), but also for 'translation' in the widest sense, such as the transfer of crucial information from one specialist (e.g. a medical specialist) to another (e.g. a general physician).

Many disciplines across faculty boundaries have their own academic experts working on related themes. These include topics such as health communication, human computing interaction, methodologies for acquiring Dutch as a second language, language teaching methodologies for secondary education, developments in language as a result of the emergence of global English, Bible translation, Unesco and endangered languages, cognition and hearing impairment, super diversity in society and languages, strategies for enhancement of reading among children, the relationship between language and culture

as the research focus in the Dutch and English literature groups, and many others. These nuclei of expertise (some broad, some niche, some fundamental, some applied or even vocational) can be a major source of inspiration and information for VU's own language policies. They could well provide a starting point for broadening the interaction of academic research on language, communication and citizenship, taking the major societal challenges related to language, capabilities and social disparity into account. VU's Language Strategy might inspire researchers to understand the campus, the city of Amsterdam and the broader contexts that staff and students are recruited from as unique features with respect to the four profile themes. Here are some possibilities for a project group discussion to develop this further:

- Expressing the links between the language, communication and information research agendas at VU.
- Connecting the Language Strategy to the VU Strategy, taking into account the four profile themes: Connected World, Governance for Society, Human Health and Life Sciences en Science for Sustainability.
- Focussing on the VU strategic aspirations: education, research, knowledge transfer, and operational management.

⁵ At the time of finalizing this document, the *Sector plans* were published, and in September 2022 they will be discussed in parliament. As for the VU Language Strategy we draw the attention to the following sub themes: Communication, Information and Social Inequality (a project on improving reading motivation of the VU Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences), Languages and Cultures, and projects on Language Variation, and Literacy and Inclusion in a Digital Society.



5. Turning existing language diversity into a key component of the social and cultural campus

Language diversity policies are not new. Indeed, they have a long history of creation, accommodation and destruction. Examples include colonial histories of divide and rule, existing mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion and separation, political histories of hierarchies between national languages and minority languages or dialects, of language bubbles, nationalism and political struggles, or of academic traditions connected to certain languages. Most members of the VU community will have a certain awareness of such aspects with respect to the history of, and command and use of, their own language. Language as an aspect of the social and cultural campus aims to make us aware of these social, cultural, historical and political aspects and the complex relationship between language diversity and identity politics.

The final policy line follows from the previous four as described above, and focuses on the 'social and cultural VU campus'. The VU ['Social Campus'](#) strategy team aims at strengthening the social and cultural potential of the physical campus by focusing on organizing events, turning the campus into a 'green' site, promoting entrepreneurship, promoting Uni-Life, and engaging in other culturally interesting activities. Strengthening the experience of a multilingual environment could well become another aspect of this strategy. In fact, this has already been happening on a small scale, for instance when 1.5 m. stickers used various languages to speak to everyone on campus, or where texts on transparent walls, such as in the global room, refer to places all around the world.

We see other possibilities for exploring these ideas further:

- An annual language diversity festival could be held, with both student organizations and networks as well as staff being invited to develop relevant initiatives.
- The University Library 'omboekens'- project and the refurbishment of study spaces are currently considering the use of multiple languages.
- The programming of Rialto and Griffioen could include a dedicated approach to languages other than English and Dutch.
- Narrow casting initiatives could be directed to further exploring the social and cultural campus.