

A New Angle:

Establishing English as Language of Instruction

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Setting

A small German university of applied sciences decided to become more international and, as part of the new internationalization strategy, to increase the number of English-taught modules in its mainly German-language degree courses. The overall aims were to increase the appeal for international exchange students, to deepen partnerships with international universities, and to offer students English-language and/or international learning experiences. Also, the increase in English teaching was expected to facilitate the future introduction of additional degree courses taught exclusively in English at the institution.

However, several challenges arose. Some German students opposed the transition to English, citing insufficient language proficiency and concerns about potential declines in their academic performance. Some professors also lacked the necessary language skills to offer their modules in English. Additionally, due to its small size, the university had only limited staff capacities and financial means to support this development. Finally, there was also a time-component involved – there was no time to teach English to those whose skills are insufficient.

The university management was therefore reluctant to set a fixed number and format for new English-taught modules. Nonetheless, the introduction of more English-taught modules remained a pressing issue, and a suitable approach needed to be found.

Case

As part of a two-year project, a systematic concept was developed to increase the ratio of English-taught courses in the institution's curriculum across departments. Due to the challenges mentioned above, the project team proposed an incremental approach, allowing for the introduction of modules with English language at different scales and with varying degrees of international engagement. The resulting modules were named ELI, short for "English language teaching increments" (*German: **Englischsprachige LehrInkmente***).

Four different ELI stages were defined:

- ELI Basic: a module still mostly in German, but with English elements, e.g. English teaching materials, an English language guest lecture, English language exercises and practices
- ELI Classic: a module fully taught in English
- ELI Digital Exchange: a module involving virtual collaboration with international partner universities
- ELI Mobility: a module including short-term physical mobility abroad, e.g. at a partner university

Once established, the ELI was expected to be offered on a regular basis and to be included in the official curricula of the respective degree courses as part of the pool of elective modules.

Especially in the case of ELI Mobility, a separate budget was made available to cover travel expenses for short-term mobilities. Professors who wanted to offer an ELI Mobility had to apply by filling out a form outlining the ELI's importance and contribution to the curriculum, as well as detailing its implementation and cooperation with an international partner.

Contrary to the expected results, after two years, the developed ELI didn't exactly match the anticipated distribution across the four stages: Basic, Classic, Digital Exchange and Mobility.

In the case of ELI Basic, it was difficult to measure their increase or final amount, since the modules were still officially labelled as "German-taught" and professors would not always promote them to prospective students. In some cases, professors might have felt an ELI Basic was not worth the effort, since it would still not be really suitable for international exchange students without German knowledge. Equally, some professors might have felt there is no point in a new label, since they already used English material in their German lectures for a long time.

The ELI Classic were less in number than expected. Even though digital tools such as DeepL (AI-based translation software) were provided by the university, only a handful of modules were fully switched to English.

This might have been due to the fact that they were still part of official German-taught degree courses and, as such, mainly enrolled German-speaking students, raising the question of the direct benefit versus additional effort for students and professors alike.

Probably the biggest surprise came from the discrepancy between the number of ELI Digital Exchange and ELI Mobility. While initially the aim was to reach a ratio of roughly two ELI Digital Exchange per ELI Mobility, demand for ELI Mobility was significantly higher and resulted in an inverse ratio, with ELI Mobility widely surpassing the amount of ELI Digital Exchange. The ELI Mobility format required an application process by the professors to secure financial support, significant time commitment, and very close cooperation and organization with the corresponding partner institution. It was therefore expected that the attractiveness of ELI Digital Exchange would benefit from lower organization (e.g. for travel) while still allowing for (virtual) international exchange. Nonetheless, the ELI Mobility format was highly attractive due to the opportunity to travel abroad and engage with international peers in person.

In conclusion, the number of English-taught modules was successfully expanded, though not exactly as anticipated. The university has continued to expand its offerings. A number of required core modules have been switched to English and are now available to exchange students as ELI Classic modules. Additionally, the university management decided to introduce the first two fully English-taught degree courses. The benefit of developing the four-pronged approach to incorporating ELI into the curriculum is that it has created a foundation for future international engagement.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Would a fixed number and range of English-taught modules have led to more consistent results?
- Other than physical mobility, what other incentives could motivate both students and teachers to switch to English?
- In what ways could limited institutional resources be balanced with the demand for greater international engagement?
- How can resistance among students and faculty toward English-taught modules be constructively addressed?
- What could make virtual international collaboration more appealing to faculty and students?
- How might the success of ELI modules be assessed to ensure their long-term sustainability and impact?
- To what extent can the ELI model serve as a transferable framework for other universities facing similar challenges?