

UFS launches Academy for Multilingualism

With the aim of promoting Sesotho, isiZulu, and Afrikaans on institutional and social levels through various academic and community-based projects and initiatives, the University of the Free State (UFS) has established an Academy for Multilingualism. Multilingualism is conceptualised as a tool that leverages language richness to improve academic excellence and promote an inclusive institutional space.



Dr Peet van Aardt, custodian of the new Academy for Multilingualism

The UFS Language Policy was approved by the Council in 2016, when English became the primary language of instruction at undergraduate and postgraduate levels on all three campuses. Through the policy, the university has pledged to enable a language-rich environment that is committed to multilingualism, with particular attention to English, Afrikaans, Sesotho, and isiZulu. The academy serves as a vehicle to further imbed the implementation of the Language Policy.

Comprehension gaps

The Student Language Preference Survey completed in June 2020 indicated that many students have difficulty in understanding their lecturers in class due to language differences. “We also looked at multilingual models from places like South America, India, and South Africa in order to structure our approach,” says Dr Peet van Aardt, custodian of the academy. “Multilingualism has become a popular research field,” he explains, “and we hope to collaborate with universities that are implementing it successfully.” The academy is in the process of generating multilingual academic aids, not only to support learning, but also to create a more representative space on the university’s campuses.

The new look of academic languages

In close collaboration with the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning, as well as the different language departments on the campuses, the Academy for Multilingualism will, among others, facilitate multilingual academic glossaries, abstract translations, voice-overs for lessons, and tutorials. “Our aim is to ingrain the academy in the university’s academic and social outlook through intra-institutional collaboration and becoming a leading institution on the world map of multilingualism,” Dr Van Aardt continues.

Language links

The Academy for Multilingualism puts the UFS among the frontrunners of this approach. “Language is a barrier to learning for many students,” Dr Van Aardt explains. “You just have to walk around on our campuses (or browse our social media platforms) to appreciate the many different languages that are used.” Dr Van Aardt believes that overcoming the language barrier to learning not only promotes knowledge gain but will also help students to develop an identity within their own language cultures.

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