

## Higher Education Language Educator Competences (HELECs)

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### 1. Introduction

Higher Education Language Educator Competences (HELECs<sup>1</sup>) is an inter-institutional project which investigates the range of language educator skills needed in higher education (HE). The purpose of the project is to develop an empirically-informed competence framework which is aligned with the National Forum for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's *National Professional Development Framework for all Staff Who Teach in Higher Education* (2016). The framework will provide individual language educators and programme developers with a reference point and practical tools, based on a comprehensive profile of language teaching skills, to ensure that all HE language educators are appropriately supported in their professional development. The project is funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's<sup>2</sup> enhancement fund.

### 2. Rationale for the project

The national languages strategy, *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education*, published in December 2017 by the Department of Education and Skills, aims to increase the number of students learning a foreign language in higher education from approximately 4% to 20% by 2026 (2007b, p. 7), and to diversify the languages offered across the system including in higher education institutions (HEIs). To give context to this increase, a HEI with 20,000 registered students is estimated to have approximately 800 language learners among its cohort. With an increase to 20%, that institution would have to provide language learning opportunities to 4,000 students. This is a dramatic increase in uptake for languages in a system which already struggles to manage its current levels of uptake.

In addition, *Languages Connect* calls for an increase in the provision of various languages at post-primary level so that there is a (relatively modest) increase in the proportion of students taking languages as a Leaving Certificate Examination subject from 40% to 50%. All post-primary schools should offer at least two languages: the proportion who do so is currently 53%.



However, a 2017 report which surveyed schools with regard to their ability to provide languages to their students found that there was an issue regarding the lack of availability of qualified teachers:

32% of principals who commented in the general comments section, referred to a serious shortage of MFL (Modern Foreign Language) teachers. It was mentioned throughout the survey, and a reduced number of teaching graduates from the HEIs confirms this (Post-Primary Languages Ireland, 2017, p. 6).

It has been further reported in the media that schools may have to discontinue their provision of certain languages due to this shortage (O' Brien, 2019). The Department of Education and Skills will provide funding to schools to employ more language teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) and the Minister for Education issued a directive for an increase in the development of programmes for the training of post-primary language teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). These initiatives are welcome and will help to achieve the goals of *Languages Connect*. However, for the provision of languages at post-primary level to be sustainable in the long term, it is crucial for the HEIs to produce well-qualified language graduates with high levels of proficiency in order to prepare them as subject specialists for their initial teacher education and beyond. The high-quality provision of language at HEIs is critical to achieving the sustainable success of the goals of *Languages Connect* across the system sustainably.

HELECs project team members have first-hand experience of the challenges in HEI language provision at a variety of HEI types. These challenges include:

- the cost implications of small-group teaching necessary for good language provision;
- the availability of suitable teaching spaces for small-group, flexible teaching;
- the scheduling of language classes for students on diverse degree programmes and timetables across the institution;
- remuneration levels, promotion opportunities and contract conditions sufficient to attract and retain the best language educators;
- the visibility of languages in academic institutions;
- and the lack of cohesion with regard to language educator qualifications and professional development opportunities.

This project considers particularly the last concern on the above list while bearing in mind the complexity of challenges faced by language education in HE in Ireland.

It is apparent that language educators at HEIs are not required to have any specific qualification similar, for example, to the Professional Masters in Education which is required at post-primary level, or the Diploma in English Language Teaching which is often a prerequisite for teaching English at third level. Nonetheless, the project team's professional experiences of language education at HE and preliminary data gathered within the project so far have demonstrated that language educators are often highly educated. The initial survey of the landscape of language teaching & learning in Higher Education conducted within the project showed that a high proportion of language educators hold a post-graduate qualification, for the most part in the language that they teach, and in some cases in the pedagogy of that language. Moreover, the project team are aware that language educators engage in professional development activities related to their role. The lack of clarity regarding the qualifications language educators should possess means that it may be difficult for institutions to recognize these activities and for the educator themselves to prioritize the activities they plan to undertake. It also presents a significant barrier to professionalizing the role of language educators in HE and the development of a community of practice. This is evidenced by the fact that there is currently no professional association active in Ireland which focuses on the practice of language education in non-language-centre settings in HEIs. HELECs aims to develop a framework of competences for HE language educators in order to allow for a sustainable increase in language teaching capacity within the HE system and contribute to the formation of an active and effective community of practice for HE language educators.

### **3. State of the Art**

A recent and impressive taxonomy elaborated by the project *Teachers Competences in Language Education*<sup>3</sup> (Bleichenbacher, Goullier, Rossner & Schröder Sura, 2019), funded by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), reviewed 40 professional development frameworks in the field. It identifies eight categories (ibid. p. 6) of teacher competences in language education:

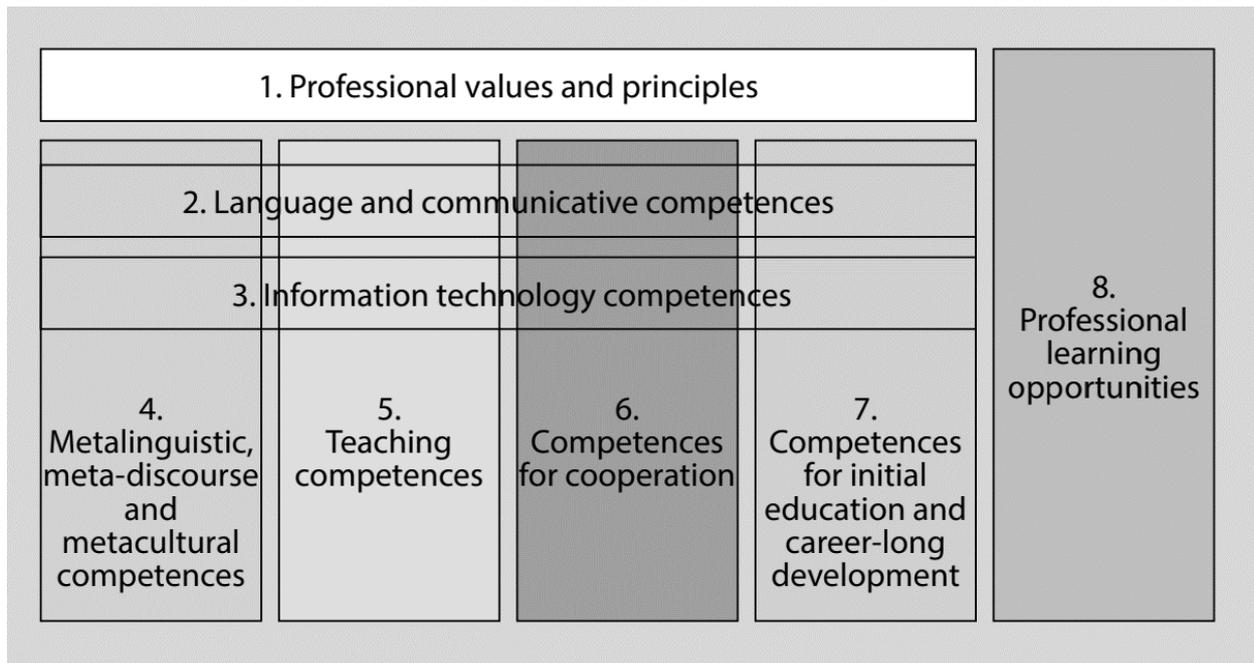


Figure 1: Taxonomy of categories of teacher competences for languages in education

These competences are seen as relevant to all educators with regard to language considerations in education irrespective of whether or not they teach language or any other subject.

While the review is comprehensive and highlights the commonalities between the array of frameworks, it appears that none targets HE language educators specifically, except in the context of initial teacher education for post-primary teachers training at HEIs and Language for Academic Purposes (LAP), most often in the context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. The authors of the ECML project advocate further research with a dual focus, i.e. a common matrix of competences for all language educators, alongside a more specific and context-focused approach when defining the descriptors of these competences. The recommendation for context-specific research was deemed ‘urgent’ (ibid. pp. 27-28). HELECs aims to address this urgent need within the HE language provision context within which we contend that the teaching of language is significantly different in its aims, skill set, outcomes and target learners.

Our own review suggests that with regard to a context-focused approach to language education, the specificity of the HE sector is overlooked when the professionalization of language education is considered. Given the attention currently afforded to teaching and learning in HE in Ireland, e.g. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and its strategy 2019-21, as well as the aforementioned urgency in addressing

specific contexts in language education at European level (Bleichenbacher et al., 2019), HELECs is a timely initiative.

HELECs is underpinned by the values expressed in the *National Professional Development Framework for Professional Development for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education in Ireland* (2016). The framework comprises five domains. Our review highlights the domains that are well served by existing professional development frameworks for language teachers; it also identifies the domains that are overlooked, in order to better inform the development of a language-educator-specific professional development framework for HE.

The below graphic illustrates the five domains of for the professional development of teaching staff in HEIs identified by the National Forum.



Figure 2: The national professional development framework for all staff who teach in Higher Education

When comparing the taxonomy of teacher competences for languages produced by the ECML and the framework of professional development of all staff who teach in HE developed by the National Forum, it can be seen that there is much overlap between the two. There are, however, areas which are only apparent in one or the other. Notably, the National Forum framework refers to professional knowledge and skills but not explicitly to areas such as metalinguistic or meta-cultural competences. On the other hand, the ECML taxonomy does not refer to the

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which can be seen as a fundamental aspect of the National Forum framework.

The HELECs project aims to bridge the gap between language educators’ competences and HE teaching competences to produce a context-specific framework which addresses the particular competences and professional development activities of language educators in HE in Ireland.

#### 4. Methodology

The HELECs project team comprises experienced applied linguistics researchers with expertise in language provision in HE. The empirical research for this project will underpin the development of a framework of competences by investigating the context and consulting with relevant stake-holders. The research plan comprises three phases as illustrated in the graphic below.

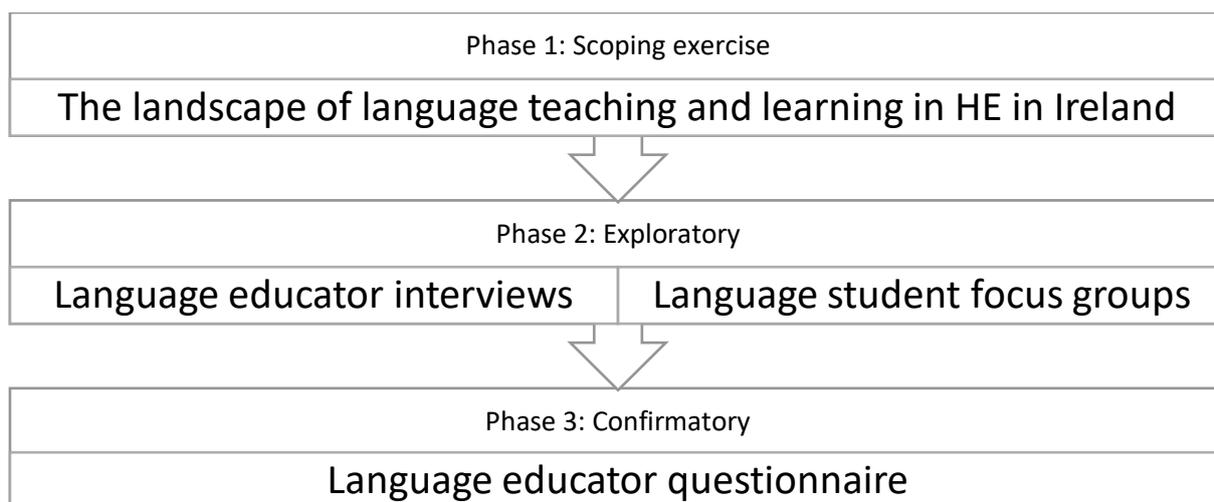


Figure 3: HELECs empirical research plan

The project team includes language educators and applied linguists from four different HEIs (University College Cork, Maynooth University, Waterford Institute of Technology and Dublin City University) and four different languages (German, French, Italian and Irish) so that we have a general understanding of the processes of language provision in Irish HEIs. However, we are also aware that the language teaching context is complex and varied so that the need to survey the landscape as a vital element of the scoping exercise for the project was clearly identified. Therefore, the initial phase of the project aimed to map the teaching and learning of languages in HE in Ireland. It became immediately apparent that structures and practices vary widely between and even within institutions, even more so than the team had expected. The

official websites of the HEIs where languages are offered as well as the data gathered by Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) regarding the programmes on which languages are offered were interrogated. Team members investigated their own institutions to gather more granular data by accessing each HEI's publicly available information and augmenting this with their own institutional knowledge. Particular areas of complexity identified were:

- the array of degree programmes and discipline areas within which languages are offered;
- the schools, departments, disciplines and other units within which languages are housed;
- the various management structures of language educators;
- the plethora of designations for language educators (e.g. lecturers, language assistants, college language teachers, teaching fellows, tutors etc.);
- and the diverse qualifications of language educators and the disciplines in which they were awarded these qualifications.

HELECs project members have presented these findings at various conferences and will publish this survey in the coming months; some preliminary results are available on the project website, [HELECs.ie](http://HELECs.ie).

The second phase of the data collection for this project is concerned with exploring the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the competences of HE language educators. The primary focus here is on the language educators themselves as they are best placed to identify the competences that they have already developed and aspire to develop further. The team interviewed a total of 19 language educators from the four project partner institutions. The participants were not interviewed by a team member from their home institution to ensure that the participant did not feel inhibited in their responses. A summary of the language educator interview participants can be seen in Figure 4. Seven languages were captured in the interview study including Irish, the European languages which are traditionally dominant in the Irish education system (French, Spanish and German), less commonly taught languages (Italian and Chinese) and one minority language (Basque). The range of participants' role designations is also worth noting. A total of eleven different titles were captured including academic roles where the primary focus of educators' work does not centre on language teaching (e.g. research in the area of literary cultural studies), language-focussed roles where the educator is concerned mainly or exclusively with the provision of language and 'other' roles which are generally temporary positions used to cover language teaching which cannot be delivered by permanent

staff members. This array of language educator roles reflects the finding of the scoping phase of the empirical study.

		Irish	French	Spanish	German	Italian	Chinese	Basque
Academic	Professor							
	Assistant professor							
	Senior lecturer							
	Lecturer (above the bar)							
	Lecturer (below the bar)							
	Manager							
Language-focussed	College Language Teacher							
	Tutor							
	Lektor (externally funded)							
Other	Part-time							
	PhD Student							

Figure 4: Profile of language educators interviewed by HELECs

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and interviewers used a guided interview approach where the participants had received the interview guide one week in advance of the interview. Consent forms and participant information leaflets were also provided to each participant.

A further method used in the exploratory phase of the study is the focus group interview with language students. This phase is being conducted at time of writing. These focus-group interviews will also be conducted by team members from an institution other than the students' own in order to avoid any conflict of interests or indeed risk of skewing the data. It must be noted that the recruitment of students has proven difficult with regard to the range of students that take languages and their varying schedules which often makes finding an appropriate time difficult. Additionally, the project team is cognizant of the challenges in contacting students

resulting from GDPR restrictions. Recruitment has, therefore, been conducted by advertising on social media and VLE platforms as well as speaking to students directly. At time of writing, focus groups have taken place at three of the four partner institutions and have accessed the views of students on various programmes of study.

The third phase of the empirical research will be a questionnaire for language educators to be distributed nationally. This questionnaire will be based on the scoping and exploratory data. The aim of the questionnaire is to confirm the perspectives of participants comprising the exploratory sample population within the wider language teaching community.

The findings of each of these phases will be combined with the insights gained from extant frameworks for language educators as well as HE teaching staff competences in order to develop an evidence-based, context-specific framework of HE language educator competences.

## **5. Summary**

The most positive development in language education in Ireland in many decades, *Languages Connects*, offers applied linguists and language educators a unique opportunity to highlight concerns and develop initiatives that benefit the provision of language learning in all educational sectors in Ireland. HELECs has identified the professional development of language educators in HE as a particularly urgent case. This is borne out in the review of relevant literature where no overarching framework for HE language educator competences has been identifiable and where generic HE teaching and learning frameworks are insufficient to address the complexities of HE language provision. Our provisional data analysis also highlights educators' concerns about their ability to gain recognition and support for the professional development activities that they wish to undertake as essential components of their professional identities. HELECs will deliver a practicable, evidence-based tool in line with current developments in language teacher training internationally and with initiatives to develop greater scholarship in language teaching and learning at HE level in Ireland. In this way, we hope to contribute to the professionalization of language educators in HE, develop a community of excellent practitioners and help to build capacity for an even more effective language provision in HEIs.

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<sup>1</sup> More information at [www.helecs.ie](http://www.helecs.ie)

<sup>2</sup> More information at <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-2019/TowardsaCommonEuropeanFrameworkofReferenceforLanguageTeachers/tabid/1850/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>