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COMMENT



Navigating multilingual futures: rethinking the role of languages in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This commentary responds to Jo Angouri and Melina Delmas's (2025) article *Multilingualism in higher education: (What) do European University Alliances deliver?* It offers a concrete example of how alliances can move beyond the belief that more multilingualism simply means more language learning. As Angouri and Delmas rightly observe, this narrow understanding still characterises many European University Alliances, which limits engagement with the broader sociolinguistic, political, and epistemic dimensions of multilingual higher education. The recently released *Language Compass* (CU.mil 2025) exemplifies a more systemic and integrated approach. Developed within the Multilingualism, Interculturality and Language Lab of the Circle U. European University Alliance, it redefines what language policy can mean in higher education by shifting attention from language acquisition to the systemic, ethical, and epistemic dimensions of linguistic and cultural diversity. It frames language policy as orientation rather than regulation and highlights linguistic diversity as a collective responsibility shared across the academic community. Grounded in research and aligned with European and international frameworks on languages, inclusion, and technology-enhanced education, the Compass promotes iterative cycles of awareness, reflection, adaptation, and action; it also offers very concrete suggestions to help universities translate recognition of multilingualism and interculturality into practice.

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Introduction

In their recent 2025 article '*Multilingualism in higher education: (What) do European university alliances deliver?*' Jo Angouri and Melina Dalmas provide an insightful and timely analysis of how multilingualism has been framed and implemented across European University Alliances (EUAs). Their comprehensive review of 32 alliances offers valuable evidence that, despite the visibility of multilingualism in policy documents and strategic communications, its enactment in practice remains largely centered on language learning. As they convincingly argue, this emphasis, while important, tends to obscure the broader sociolinguistic, political, and epistemic dimensions necessary to build truly multilingual higher education environments.

The present Commentary builds on and extends their argument by offering a concrete example of how these broader dimensions can be operationalised, and in the spirit of their article's title, how they can in fact be 'delivered' in practice. It does so by introducing the Circle U. Language Compass

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(CU.mil 2025), a framework recently developed within the Multilingualism, Interculturality and Language (CU.mil) lab of the Circle U. European University Alliance. The Compass has been conceived as a participatory and dynamic tool which does not resemble typical language policy documents. It has been designed to improve linguistic and cultural diversity across the four domains that EUAs typically reference: teaching and learning, research, communication, and governance. Its participatory nature operates on three interconnected levels. First, the Compass was collaboratively developed within the CU.mil lab through iterative consultation, co-design sessions, and collective reflection across Circle U. partners. Second, it is participatory in the way it is meant to be used within our universities: the structure of each of the four compass directions encourages ongoing cycles of awareness, reflection, and action that invite individuals and teams to adapt the guidance to their own institutional realities. Third, the Compass remains an open and evolving resource for the entire Circle U. community. All members (be they students, staff, academics, or administrators) can provide feedback, share examples of good practice, ask questions, or propose additions through a dedicated form. This ensures that the Compass grows through collective input and remains responsive to the situated multilingual and intercultural practices of the alliance members. From the outset, the Language Compass explicitly shifts the focus from language learning alone to the systemic presence and function of languages across all areas of academic life. It also exemplifies how alliances can translate their intellectual commitment to multilingualism into sustained, inclusive, and reflexive institutional practices. It presents multilingualism not merely as an educational goal, but as a shared epistemic and ethical principle and commitment. It also demonstrates that many meaningful steps toward plurilingual and inclusive practices do not necessarily require additional funding, as they can build on existing human, digital, and institutional resources already present within universities. European University Alliances are indeed ideally positioned to do so through ongoing initiatives such as COIL projects, joint courses, summer schools, and other collaborative formats that naturally foster linguistic and cultural diversity. This diversity should not only be found among participants, but in the way languages are integrated into collective knowledge building.

Argument

Across European higher education, and particularly in EUAs, multilingualism is both celebrated and constrained: repeatedly praised in policy discourses, and yet often overshadowed by the dominance of English as a lingua franca for internationalisation. As Dafouz (2021) and Gazzola (2016) argue the tension between diversity and standardisation remains one of the central challenges in transnational academic spaces. The Circle U. Language Compass was conceived in response to this paradox. Instead of offering yet another static policy document, it proposes a living framework, a type of navigation tool (hence the Compass metaphor) to help individuals and universities orient themselves in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity. The Compass rests on the conviction that languages are not peripheral to academia, and are not a mere variable of communication (i.e. message in language X or Y), but that they structure and mediate knowledge, and reveal the epistemologies through which we perceive and shape higher education.

Traditional university (and EUAs's) language policies often resemble roadmaps: they chart a single path toward clearly defined goals, typically revolving around proficiency benchmarks, language hierarchies, or international competitiveness. Such approaches, while administratively convenient (at least in principle), tend to reduce multilingualism to a technical issue to be measured, managed, or remediated. More multilingualism is frequently equated with offering more or better language courses, or with promoting mobility and stays abroad. These policies, however, tend to neglect the role of languages in knowledge creation and dissemination. As explained by Flores (2013) and Phillipson (2006), such conceptions often reproduce the very hierarchies that European University Alliances seek to challenge: they de facto position English as the inevitable destination of linguistic progress, knowledge production, and communication. This is evident in the tendency to

default to English whenever courses, meetings, institutional briefs, or website content are not conducted or produced in the local institutional language.

These tendencies stress the need for more dynamic and participatory approaches to multilingualism. This is all the more relevant as each university operates within its own educational traditions, political contexts, and institutional constraints. Creating a single, one-size-fits-all language policy across alliances (often one of the typical deliverables in EUA roadmaps) is therefore a virtually impossible task. It often tends to result in broad wish lists of activities such as multilingual cafés or culture weeks. While such initiatives are extremely valuable and worth maintaining, they remain insufficient to bring about deeper, transformative change.

With this in mind, CU.mil drew inspiration from plurilingual and intercultural perspectives (Coyle and Meyer 2021; Li Wei 2021; Marshall and Moore 2018) and new pluriliteracies practices (Meunier 2025), i.e. the need to integrate multiple literacies into everyday academic practice and move beyond the disciplinary and linguistic silos that still fragment education today.

The Circle U. Language Compass invites institutions to move from compliance-driven policies toward a more dynamic and inclusive understanding of the role of languages in academia. The four cardinal directions of the Compass (teaching and learning, research, communication, and governance) encourage each actor in the academic community to rethink the role of languages and be a change agent. Each of the four directions is further articulated around three complementary sub-sections: Worth knowing and thinking about; Guidance and toolkit; Act/Reflect/Share. This structure encourages users to engage in an ongoing cycle of awareness, reflection, and actions to translate the Compass philosophy into a concrete process of transformation. Pre-conceptions can be challenged (and support literature provided), readers are invited to reflect on the role of languages, practical solutions are provided, invitations to adopt new practices are numerous, and options are offered to the whole community to share good practices, provide feedback, or ask questions.

Figure 1 below is the visual display of the Compass's structure.

The contents of the Compass aligns with current calls for epistemic and linguistic justice in higher education (Hamel 2013; Helsinki Initiative 2019). Epistemic and linguistic justice refer to the idea that equitable participation in higher education requires not only access to multiple languages but recognition of the distinct epistemologies that languages carry. Linguistic justice aims to ensure that speakers of all languages can take part in teaching, research, communication, and governance without structural disadvantage. Epistemic justice goes further by highlighting

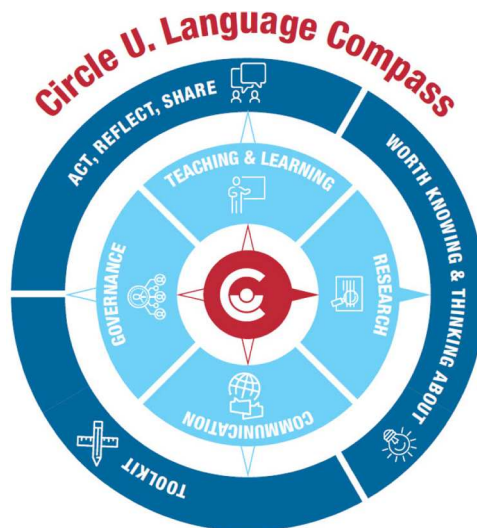


Figure 1. The Circle U. Language Compass Structure.

how the dominance of a single language (most often English) can marginalise alternative perspectives, knowledge traditions, and modes of reasoning. The Compass seeks to counter these forms of inequity by promoting practices that value linguistic plurality as an epistemic resource rather than an obstacle. The Compass also aligns with broader European and international frameworks such as the Council of Europe Recommendation on plurilingual and intercultural education (2022), the EU Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu), and UNESCO’s Futures of Education and Guidance for generative AI in education and research reports. References to these frameworks clearly situate the Compass within global efforts to link linguistic diversity, intercultural inclusion, and ethically grounded, technology-enhanced education.

It has also been developed as an Open Educational Resource (OER) which is freely accessible through the Zenodo EU portal (the full version of Language Compass can be accessed directly via its DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17377697>). Zenodo is an EU open-access repository used across Europe for hosting research outputs, datasets, and educational materials. It respects open science standards and allows for versioned updates. Two versions of the Compass are already available and future revisions will be uploaded under the same record, each with its own DOI but connected to a single, permanent concept DOI.

Our hope is that the Compass will allow universities to account for situated diversity (i.e. within the various linguistic landscapes, disciplinary practices, and sociopolitical realities that shape academic life). This conceptual shift that the Compass aims to bring about is aligned with plurilingual and translanguaging theories that view languages not as separate systems but as interconnected repertoires of meaning-making (Li Wei 2021; Marshall and Moore 2018). It also aligns with inclusive governance perspectives that stress adaptability over uniformity (Bärenfänger, Delgado, and Gackle 2022; Dafouz 2021). By framing language policy as orientation rather than regulation, the Language Compass encourages institutions to acknowledge that each academic community must find its own bearings. It replaces the question of which language(s) to use with that of how language choices shape access, participation, and knowledge building.

Conclusion: towards multilingual futures

The Circle U. Language Compass invites its partner universities to reimagine multilingualism as a transformative principle rather than a peripheral concern. It frames linguistic and cultural diversity as conditions for knowledge creation, inclusion, and innovation. Its logic is not additive (more languages) but integrative, i.e. how can every domain of academic life become plurilingually aware and responsive. This reflection also builds on pluriliteracies, i.e. the ability to construct, interpret, and communicate knowledge across languages and modes which is essential for meaningful participation in today’s complex academic and social environments. The Compass operationalises this idea at the institutional level, and turns pluriliteracies into a collective orientation for teaching, research, communication, and governance. It offers no fixed route. It is a tool to help find direction amid complexity. Linguistic and cultural diversity cannot be managed by decree. They must be negotiated, continuously re-imagined, and most importantly enacted. The CU.mil’s hope is that our work extends Angouri and Delmas’s reflection on what European University Alliances can *deliver* by showing how multilingualism can become a lived, transformative practice.

Acknowledgement and authorship note

This article refers to the collective work of the CU.mil team within the Circle U. European University Alliance. While the conceptual framing, structure, and text of this commentary were written by the author, the Compass itself is the result of collaborative development and dialogue among all the members of the CU.mil (in alphabetical order: Ana de Medeiros (King’s College London), Edlinger, Jakob (University of Vienna), Pia Lane (University of Oslo), Fanny Meunier (UCLouvain), Karine Paris (Université Paris Cité), Charlotte Peters (UCLouvain), Dalibor Sokolović (University of Belgrade), Ute

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Author's statement on AI use

ChatGPT-5 was used solely for editorial assistance, including language refinement and formatting. All ideas, arguments, interpretations, and final text are the author's own. The AI tool did not contribute to conceptual content or claims of originality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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