The UNIcert® Initiative

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Résumé : *L'article présente la réalité de l'initiative UNIcert® «university certificate» , un système d'évaluation et certification en langues spécialement conçu pour les besoins du milieu académique, né en Allemagne au début des années 90 pour faire face à la forte demande de formation en langues d'étudiants de disciplines non linguistiques et aux problèmes connexes avec cette formation. L'auteur retrace les raisons qui ont amené à la création de UNIcert® en partant de quelques considérations sur la restructuration des cursus universitaires qui a suivi le processus de Bologna. Il s'interroge sur les risques que l'enseignement des langues peut avoir suite à cette même restructuration au cas où son implémentation ne soit pas effectuée de manière ciblée et conforme aux objectifs à atteindre.*

La nature de UNIcert® - qui entre temps a été intégré par plus de 50 institutions d'enseignement y compris en dehors du contexte allemand (Autriche, France, République Slovaque) - en fait un outil à la fois souple et structuré de support à toute institution de niveau universitaire souhaitant concevoir et mettre en place des formations et des certifications en langues spécialement adaptés aux exigences académiques et en même temps cohérents avec les lignes du CECR.

Mots clés : *UNIcert® «university certificate», processus de Bologna, enseignement des langues à l'université, disciplines non linguistique*

Abstract : *The author presents in this article the UNIcert® Initiative –university certificate, a foreign language assessment and certification system specially conceived to meet academic needs, which was created in Germany in the early nineties to face the increased demand for language education by students of non-language subjects and its related problems. Moving from some reflections on the restructuring of degree programmes following the Bologna agreement the author presents the reasons underpinning the creation of UNIcert®˜ He questions the risks for language teaching in the case of a non effective implementation of this restructuring process, i.e. if conformity to the foreseen objectives is not taken into due consideration.*

The nature of UNIcert®– which meanwhile has been adopted by over 50 educational institutions, included outside the German context (Austria, France, The Slovakian Republic) – is that of being an effective tool, both flexible and structured, to support all sorts of institutions at a university level which need to plan and implement language programmes and certifications particularly suitable to meet academic needs and at the same time coherent with the guidelines of the CEFR.

Keywords : *UNIcert® «university certificate», Bologna agreement, language teaching at university, non-language subjects*

Since UNIcert® has become an increasingly heard name in language learning and teaching in higher education, I would like to take the opportunity to explain why it was created in the first place, what its key ideas are, and how these are implemented in practice.

The "why" needs to be seen against the backdrop of the massive changes affecting higher education over the last 15 years or so which peaked with the Bologna agreement and consequent restructuring of degree programmes along the BA/MA (or 3+2) model still being implemented throughout Europe. While we all agree that we need more people with higher education and that in the world of today graduates in any subject need a ready-to-use foreign language profile (usually English plus at least one other foreign language) to be able to perform adequately in their chosen fields, academic institutions do not always offer students the opportunities to develop the necessary foreign language skills. What they are offered instead – more often than not – is whatever is left over from the compulsory programmes, and invested in the so-called "soft skills" where language learning may be in competition with computer literacy, academic writing skills, rhetorical training etc, with no clear views of expected outcomes beyond the level of an individual course. In other words, there is usually no clear idea of the language skills a graduate in a particular subject should have, and if students press too hard they are referred to external testing systems (such as the Cambridge tests, or those of the Alliance Française etc), which are not usually concerned with the special language needs of graduates and where the language training needed to take these tests is (quite legitimately, under the circumstances) relegated to institutions outside the academic sector.

It is with this problem in mind that UNIcert® was created in Germany, starting not from the point of view of what can be done with what is left over from the academic programme, but from the perspective of what is needed to help students obtain a useful and usable language qualification. It soon became apparent that language training needed to be provided in larger "chunks", or groups of courses, or "modules", amounting to coherent partial programmes rather than as an unspecific number of individual, unconnected courses if learners are to experience a clear move from any level of language competence, and that the successful completion of these chunks should be tested in an appropriate examination and be rewarded by a certificate. It was obvious that the same results would need different time investments for different languages, e.g. a mother-tongue German learner would need more time for learning Russian than for the same level in Dutch. It was also obvious that the programmes needed to reflect, in content (academic work/ research, preparation for study visit/internship/international academic contacts/work placement/customer contacts) and organisation (time constraints leading to steep rates of progress, intensive courses, cognitive support etc), the needs of a special clientele. Finally, it also became apparent very quickly that university language training legitimately operates at different levels of language competence, e.g. by offering beginner classes in important languages not usually taught at school, or more advanced classes for languages with a school history, and that there needs to be a way of showing this clearly by using a framework of levels or stages applicable for all languages.

UNIcert® then stands for "university certificate". It was created to bring some order into the chaos which had accompanied the expansion of university language teaching to students of non-language subjects. As outlined above, three problem areas had become more and more obvious. The hours assigned to language learning differed enormously from core subject to core subject, since they were not based on any experience of what was needed to achieve particular aims, but on what was left over from the course programming of the main subjects. The hours assigned to language learning differed enormously from language to language - for no apparent reason at all. In practice, frequently-taught languages (such as English) tended to be given more hours than less frequently taught ones (such as Finnish), although the reverse might have been needed. In particular, however, the hours assigned to language learning in a large number of cases

were seen as individual courses that did not necessarily amount to a coherent programme and which did not lead to any particular target. In other words, language education was only too often a matter of using up a few hours not needed elsewhere and of needing to being content with whatever the outcome might (or might not) be.

UNIcert® tries to address these problems by deploying a common blueprint for language education programmes for students of different disciplines and by defining, assessing and documenting various levels of achievement which would be comparable, not necessarily identical for different languages, different academic disciplines and different academic institutions. It provides a framework for language teaching programmes suggesting that a certain number of hours are required to achieve certain aims, and if some of these hours are not available within the compulsory programme, they should be offered extra, as an option. Experience has confirmed our belief that wherever attractive, goal-oriented language programmes are offered a surprisingly high number of students are prepared to make the extra effort and invest the extra time needed if it leads to a visible extra qualification. Finally, UNIcert® also provides a definition of four levels of achievement as a framework of reference for the aims to be achieved in the various languages taught, pre-dating the Common European Framework of Reference by some years while providing at the same time a university-specific interpretation of CEF levels B1-C2.

Turning to the question of implementation, institutions wishing to use UNIcert® can develop their own course programmes and assessment procedures within the UNIcert® framework, seek accreditation with UNIcert® and where successful, renew their accreditation at three-year intervals. Technical details are easily accessible from the UNIcert® home page (rcswww.urz.tu-dresden.de/~unicert)and other sources (e.g. Voss 2002, 2003). But what may be of interest here is that since its inception in the early 1990s, UNIcert® has developed into Germany's major accreditation agency for university-specific language programmes. Up to now, well over 25,000 certificates have been issued by the affiliated institutions, and UNIcert® is currently being used by over 50 academic language teaching institutions as a framework for organizing their teaching and assessment. Two recent developments are perhaps worth highlighting in this context. Firstly, the modular structure, accreditation and re-accreditation procedures used for UNIcert® sit well with currently developed modules and the accreditation and evaluation procedures increasingly used for academic programmes in the context of the ongoing BA/MA restructuring and the quality management routines involved. We at UNIcert® believe that this is a healthy sign, but we also believe that the accreditation and evaluation of language teaching programmes and their settings at tertiary level should be done by bodies connected with university language teaching rather than by organisations primarily concerned with other things. Secondly, we would like to suggest that the underlying concept of UNIcert® seeking comparability rather than identity, allowing for variation yet following common principles, is suitable not only for Germany but also for a wider European context. As a result, UNIcert® accreditations now also include academic language teaching institutions from outside Germany (Austria, France), and the recent creation of UNIcert® LUCE with its head office at the Economic University of Bratislava as a franchise partner shows how the UNIcert® network can be expanded by adding new intersections or nodes, as largely independent yet interconnected units providing a similar service in a different part of the expanding European Union.

So what is the benefit learners, language teachers and their institutions may derive from UNIcert®? The learner benefits in that the learning programmes are oriented towards the specific needs of university students, that they have been vetted by an outside body thus reflecting more than the experience and insights of an individual course designer, and that the certificates obtained are not only of value at the institution which issues them. University language teachers and their institutions benefits in acquiring partners in comparable institutions, as well as cooperation and load-sharing in the development and

evaluation of the language examinations used both for placement and for final assessment purposes, in-service training opportunities to bridge the gap between language teaching and language testing. UNIcert® is not suitable for contexts where top-down instruction is the norm. In other words, it cannot and would not want to comply with requests such as "Just send us your test and we are going to teach up to it". It is, however, eminently suitable for contexts where a common need is felt and where bottom-up support is sought for making university language teaching and testing more professional by helping with the professional development of the persons actually doing the work. Not surprisingly, UNIcert® is the result of an initiative emanating from the work of the German Association of Language Centres (AKS).

As I have tried to show, UNIcert® is not an external centralised examination system, but a help in setting up reasonable (and comparable) language training programmes for the academic sector, with a certificate as a reward for the effort. In other words, UNIcert® is a language training, assessment and certification system which operates along common lines of thought and action. It does not see itself in competition with external, general testing systems operating for particular languages (such as DALF, TOEFL, IELTS, TestDaF etc), but as a university-specific addition and complementation potentially embracing all languages and all subject orientations. It tries to combine a professional concern for the input (the course programme) with a professional concern for the output (expected levels or results, and appropriate assessment procedures) thus avoiding the one-sidedness of the simplistic input orientation often found in language training as a residual category (i.e. "take the hours that are left over and see..."), or the extreme output fixation characteristic of external testing systems operating by necessity without any systematic regard for the learning/teaching input needed to meet their demands.

If you find this concept as attractive as the over 50 academic institutions already operating it, why not get in touch? We at UNIcert® would be happy to hear from you.

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