Factors influencing the sustainability of University Centres promoting multilingualism in South Africa

C. Dyers
Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and Language Professions,
University of the Western Cape, South Africa
cdyers@uwc.ac.za

Abstract
The main question addressed by this article is: How can multilingual language centres based at universities ensure their long term sustainability? Research was carried out at three centres in the Western Cape to find the answers to this question. Several factors, such as funding, staff structures and support by the parent universities, appear to influence the sustainability of these centres.

INTRODUCTION
With its constitutionally enshrined 11 official languages (Act 108 of The South African Constitution, 1996), one would expect the South African government to invest a considerable amount of energy and resources into the active promotion of the indigenous languages of South Africa. The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), with its eleven National Language Bodies (NLBs) and Provincial Language Committees (PLCs), is doing a considerable amount of work in terms of research and policy recommendations. However, much of the actual provision of language services to the broader community, as well as groundbreaking research in this regard, is being done by language centres based at South African universities.

In this article, we consider whether language centres dedicated to the promotion of multilingualism can generate enough income and obtain sufficient outside funding to ensure their long-term survival. We focus on three centres in the Western Cape Province, viz. the Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and the Language Professions at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the Language Centre at the University of Stellenbosch (SUN), and the Project for Research into Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). These three university centres all aim to promote multilingualism in the three official languages of the Western Cape – Afrikaans, English and Xhosa.

On occasion, they provide services to the government, but most of the work of these centres has to do with initiatives and impulses that come from outside government departments, viz. from industry, schools and specific research projects. When taking the great need for multilingual services and training into account, one might assume that these centres have sufficient business to sustain themselves in the long term. But at the present moment, a number of challenges face them, many
of which are similar to the challenges faced by research centres at most universities. The problems include factors like proper staff structures and responsibilities, funding, support for the centres by their universities, lack of administrative support and inadequate funding.

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the ways in which these three centres operate and to what extent they manage to achieve their goals. Formal application to carry out the research was made to the directors of the three centres, and all aspects of the research was done with their approval and co-operation.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite Ridge’s assertion that ‘English is the dominant language in South Africa’ (1998, 1), Deprez and du Plessis (2000, 112) point out that no single language fulfils the diverse needs of the South African population. In fact, as with all multilingual societies, different languages are used in different domains of discourse. Therefore the focus regarding language in South Africa should be on ensuring that people can use the languages appropriate to these domains, and that those who wish to function effectively within a particular speech community can be empowered by learning the language of that community. It is also essential that, as far as possible, services be available to people in their own language, particularly in key areas such as in education and the health and social services.

Some of the provinces in South Africa have adopted language policies designed to promote multilingualism, in particular the Western Cape (Western Cape Provincial Languages Act, 1998). In November 2002, the Department of Arts and Culture published the *National language policy framework* (NLPF), and in April 2003, it published the associated Implementation Plan (IP). The NLPF encourages the promotion of all South African languages to contribute to wider multilingualism.

The National Language Framework (2000) states that language specialists need to be engaged to assist the process of developing functional multilingual programs through research and dissemination of findings. Language centres have to be staffed by such language specialists in order to carry out relevant projects that lead to the promotion of multilingualism. In building human capacity, the framework states that the implementation of the National Language Policy and Plan for South Africa (final draft, June 2000) will increase the demand for translators, editing work and interpreting services, especially in the indigenous languages. Freelance language practitioners such as translators, interpreters, and editors for indigenous languages will have to be equipped with further skills in order to be employed in language centres and in other institutions.

All the legislation and research point to the great need for far more multilingual services in all sectors and the training of many more multilingual language professionals such as language acquisition facilitators, editors, translators,
interpreters and transcribers. This in turn points to the increased need for centres providing such services and training.

Although the three language centres being studied are located at tertiary institutions for quality achievement of their goals, the extent to which they achieve their goals seems dependent on many factors. According to Cooper (2001, 49), the old frameworks of the tertiary institutions create blockages and chaos in many tertiary research centres, and these blockages lead to the minimum achievement of research centres’ goals. Cooper further states that many tertiary research centres’ inability to achieve their goals is also a result of poor administration of these centres and confusion in their mission statements. This means that the centres’ operating systems need to be looked at and monitored to ensure quality achievement of goals. Although Cooper’s study did not include university centres promoting multilingualism, it is our perception that they share many of the problems experienced by other academic research centres.

Cooper’s research team (2001, 49–53) recorded the following problems as being those shared by research centres/units in South Africa:

- Confusion over the leadership role of the unit director
- The absence of a deputy director and administrative support staff
- Difficulties in obtaining and retaining senior researchers
- Unclear research mission of units
- Confused teaching missions and practices of research units
- Difficulty of securing support for longer term research projects

To these problems, we could add the lack of formal business training of the directors of such centres. This could lead to problems like poor financial management and inadequate responses to a fairly unpredictable market.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out by visiting the three centres to conduct interviews with all staff, and to learn about each centre’s main funded projects and income-generation strategies. Key questions were:

- How such centres are funded;
- How such centres are staffed;
- What language services and training are offered by the centres;
- Whether the centres are engaged in any community projects;
- The key areas of research the centres are engaged in;
- The level of recognition enjoyed by each centre at national and international level; and
- The effectiveness of the centres in promoting multilingualism.
Information was also drawn from texts published by the centres and their websites.

The qualitative data therefore included the following: interviews conducted with staff at the three centres, research reports produced by each centre and information derived from their websites. In analysing the data, the researchers looked at specific trends, similarities and contrasts emerging from the three case studies. Finally, a case study on each centre was produced.

FINDINGS

Cooper (2003, 2–3) distinguishes two types of research centres or units currently operating at Higher Education Institutions in the Western Cape:

- ‘Traditional-virtual’ units or research groupings which are part of academic departments and are strongly rooted in curiosity-orientated or ‘basic’ research in those departments
- ‘New Real’ Centres, which focus on application-oriented research at universities and technikons. He categorises the research carried out by such centres as ‘fundamental-applied’, because these centres ‘create(s) new knowledge of the highest level internationally while simultaneously seeking ways of unlocking the knowledge to benefit society in a specific local context, that is, it combines “cutting-edge knowledge” with “context of application”.’

Our research has revealed that the three centres under investigation can all be termed ‘New Real Centres’, as all these centres are primarily (but not exclusively) concerned with the application of academic knowledge within specific social contexts such as schools and communities. Cooper (2003, 3) further stresses that the ‘mission of the new application-oriented research centre or unit, and the self-identity of its senior researchers, should confidently articulate the fact that such research groupings are something new and of equal value to society (and their HEIs) – of equal standing to that of the “traditional” academics and their highly-rated, internationally reviewed publications rooted in basic research activities.’

This means that academics and research students drawn into the activities of such centres need to see these activities as being of the same value and importance as those of traditional research centres. Such centres can enhance rather than diminish the status of individual researchers, and provide them with immediate contexts for the application of their expertise.

Case study one: Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and the Language Professions, University of the Western Cape.

Origin of the centre

Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and the Language Professions was formally launched on 30 August 1999 at the University of the Western Cape. The initiative
for the founding of the centre came principally from the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands, which sought a new role for itself at UWC. The seed funding for the centre came mainly from Afrikaner Establishment businesses and individuals. The first longitudinal projects run by the centre were three major school projects, entitled *Support in the Multilingual Classroom*. The centre offered workshops in diversity management, language policy, multilingual materials preparation, curriculum 2005 and Xhosa or Afrikaans language acquisition to educators from 30 schools, where the learner populations had become increasingly multilingual and multicultural.

Currently, the centre mainly concentrates on three areas:

- Support to educators in the Multilingual Classroom
- Literacy and Entrepreneurship training to underdeveloped rural and urban communities
- Language Services in Xhosa, Afrikaans and English: language acquisition, translation, interpreting, transcription, editing and proofreading and voice clinics in English.

**Level of Recognition enjoyed**

The centre enjoys wide recognition in the Western Cape, where it serves a number of communities, and is recognised by UWC as being a prime example of Higher Education’s responsiveness to community needs. It is a key role player in the Multilingualism Action Group (MAG), a coalition of community and academic language organisations. At national level, it has received a special award from the Pan South African Language Board in recognition of the work done by the centre in promoting multilingualism. It enjoys good international links with Die Nederlandse Taalunie, the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium as well as other Flemish universities.

**Funding of the centre**

The centre relies heavily on outside funding for its existence. Its income generation through its language services sector needs to grow much faster in order to decrease its reliance on outside funding. The best funding the centre has received to date has been awarded for community development projects through literacy and entrepreneurship/job creation, as this is an area currently enjoying a great deal of attention in South Africa. The university, through the Faculty of Arts, provides accommodation as well as the salary of its permanently appointed director.
Staffing

The Director

The centre is headed by Associate Professor Charlyn Dyers (Ph.D.), who also lectures in the Dept. Linguistics at UWC. Her duties include:

- Managing all projects in liaison with the project leaders (usually UWC lecturers)
- Fundraising
- Overall administration of the centre and reporting to the Board of Management
- Maintaining research projects
- Playing an important role in advocating multilingualism at provincial and national level.

The director reports to a Board of Management, consisting of senior academics, the dean of the Arts Faculty, and a representative of the rectorate. The centre has no deputy director, or senior researchers supporting the director.

Contract and freelance staff members

University lecturers and other suitably qualified freelance staff are drawn into the activities of the centre according to the number of funded projects and freelance work, which allow for short-term contract work. Two of the regular contract staff members are former primary school educators who are specialists in Adult Basic Literacy. The centre also provides contract work for BA Honours and MA students, who work as research and administrative assistants. A number of these students have also become sufficiently trained and experienced to serve as facilitators, translators and transcribers.

All freelance and contract staff can attend additional training workshops (paid for by the centre). Long-term contract staff members are unhappy about the fact that the centre only awards contracts between February and November. They can only regard their positions as short-term, because they are heavily dependent on the funded projects awarded to the centre. The student assistants are generally very happy to be involved in the projects, especially as it helps them to find worthy research topics for the PG degrees. They are generally better paid than student assistants at the two sister centres.

Administrative Staff

The centre employs one full-time administrative assistant who handles all enquiries and the administrative coordination of the language services and funded projects. Another important task is that of monitoring client satisfaction and relaying complaints to director and project leaders. Her annual salary is paid from outside
funding raised and income generated through the language services. She currently has a one-year renewable contract.

In addition, the centre makes use of the administrative assistant of the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands, who serves as the centre’s financial assistant.

Training offered

The centre offers practical training and informal workshops to all its staff members, and has also sent them to other centres for further training.

Research projects

The centre carries out research on the effectiveness of its own projects, as well as school-based research in the area of culture, language and identity. Such research is either funded by the UWC Faculty of Research or by the donor agency. The director and project leaders are the main researchers, assisted by student research assistants.

Income generation

Apart from fundraising for individual projects, the centre generates its own income through its language services in the three official languages of the Western Cape – Afrikaans, Xhosa and English. These services are as follows:

- Transcription of audio research materials: Academic researchers send their recorded interviews to the centre for transcription;
- Translation and Interpreting: Higher Education Institutions, government departments or agencies, businesses and individuals make use of this service;
- Editing: Students and individual departments from Higher Education Institutions make use of this service;
- Language Acquisition: The centre designs and teaches language acquisition courses to specific target groups.

Language specialists are employed on a freelance basis. Apart from the language acquisition courses, the centre normally keeps 30 per cent of the income generated from each job, while the freelance language practitioners (normally lecturers and postgraduate students in the language and linguistics departments at UWC) retain 70 per cent. The director has no previous business administration training and has had to acquire these skills informally.

On the whole, client satisfaction with the language services is high, but complaints have been received about less than satisfactory editing and transcription.

Case study two: the language centre, University of Stellenbosch.
Origin of the Centre

The Language Centre of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Stellenbosch was established on 1 July 2002. The product of many years of discussion and planning, it developed out of the Unit for Document Design at SUN. The Centre pays particular attention to the use of different languages within a multilingual context, and is also beginning to do some community outreach work with educators in one of the nearby black townships.

Level of Recognition enjoyed by the centre

The Centre enjoys the full recognition and support of its University, and was established in accordance with the university’s 2002 Language Policy. One of its units, the Unit for Document Design, has long enjoyed national recognition as a centre of excellence in training language professionals and others. The Centre has yet to establish itself internationally, but has been approached by the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands to act in an advisory capacity during the establishment of their writing centre. The Centre is also a member organisation of the Multilingualism Action Group.

Funding

The Language Centre is funded by the central budget of SUN, and most of its staff members have permanent posts. Many of them teach on accredited university programs. The Centre also generates a substantial income from the workshops and consultations offered by its Unit for Document Design. Although its Language Services Unit has only just begun operating, it will also be able to generate further income for the Centre.

Staffing

The Director

Professor Leon de Stadler (Ph.D.) is the director of the Centre. A well-known academic, he was formerly the head of SAGUS and the Writing Centre at SUN. His duties include:

- Strategical planning
- Staff administration
- Financial planning and management
- Research and training
- Liaising with clients

Professor de Stadler is supported by senior academics, who serve as heads of
the six units at the Language Centre. Prof. de Stadler reports via the Senior Director: Academic Support to the Vice-Rector for Teaching at SUN.

*The Researchers*

The Language Centre consists of six units, each with its own staff:

- The Unit for Document Design (four researchers),
- The Writing Laboratory (two researchers, one administrative assistant),
- The Unit for Afrikaans (three researchers),
- The Unit for isiXhosa (one researcher),
- The Unit for English (two researchers), and
- The Unit for language services (one researcher).

Two researchers direct the operations of the Writing Laboratory: one for English, and one for Afrikaans. Student assistants are also employed, particularly in The Writing Laboratory and The Unit for Document Design.

Most of the staff members have Masters’ degrees, and some are working towards their doctorates. As the unit is seen as a priority for the university by the rector, most of the staff members are permanently appointed. Only four are on short-term contracts, but this is seen as a temporary situation. The director is working towards getting full academic status for all staff members, who currently have the status of academic researchers.

Most of the staff members interviewed reported that they were happy with their work and conditions, but a level of unhappiness and insecurity was revealed by the lecturers working in the Units for English and Afrikaans. Their reasons were as follows:

- They were not sure whether the centre’s projects were sustainable in the long term;
- They experienced a level of tension with their former departments of English and Afrikaans and Nederlands, and felt marginalised by those departments;
- They were not happy with their salaries, which they claimed were lower than those of the academic staff, and
- They also complained that they were understaffed for the number of students to whom they had to teach Academic Literacy in Afrikaans and English. However, the time this research was carried out, a number of these issues have been addressed.

The Language Services Unit largely relies on the services of suitably qualified freelance staff for work such as translation and editing. The Unit for Document Design also makes use of such staff on occasion, sometimes awarding them short-term contracts of up to ten months in length.
Administrative staff

The director has a personal assistant on a permanent contract. She is also the general office manager, serving all the units with general administration. She has four student assistants. The writing centre also has its own administrative office manager, who advertises its workshops on the website, maintains links with the main Website of the centre and liases with the writing consultants and writing centre assistants. Administrative staff reported a high level of satisfaction with their work and conditions.

Training and Development offered

Staff at the Centre can access many of its practical training sessions and workshops. Its Unit for Document Design is widely recognised in South Africa for its training workshops to language practitioners in Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa in the following areas:

- Practical translation
- Practical editing
- Culture and translation
- Literary translation
- Bible translation
- Machine translation
- Practical journalism and
- Web text design
- Effective corporate documents

It also offers tailor-made workshops and consultations to companies wishing to improve their professional communication.

Research projects

The Unit for Document Design is currently researching the effectiveness of AIDS manuals designed to make students reflect on their sexual practices. Another research project is the evaluation of Writing Centre consultations and the effectiveness of feedback to students via the website. The Centre is also contributing to transformation at university through its various training workshops. The Unit for isiXhosa is currently focusing on terminology development for various academic disciplines at SUN.

Income generation

The Unit for Document Design has managed to build up a good reserve of funding as a result of training programs and services provided to companies, academic institutions and the government. It charges reasonable fees for these services,
enabling it to make a profit each year. The centre also generates income from the accredited courses taught by staff members. Its language services unit has recently begun operating, and according to the director, its fees are quite low in order to attract clients. As with li lwimi Centre, most of the work is done on a freelance basis, as there is considerable fluctuation in demand from one month to the next. The director has no background in business administration, but his lengthy period with SAGUS has taught him much needed skills in this regard.

Case study three: the project for the study of alternative education in South Africa (praesa) at the University of Cape Town.

Origin of the centre

Started in 1992 as an independent research and development unit, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) emerged from the struggle against apartheid education. It is located at UCT as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and, while it is bound by the university’s rules, does not receive any funding from the university. PRAESA sees itself mainly as a research and consultation centre.

The level of recognition enjoyed by the centre

PRAESA enjoys national and international recognition as perhaps the leading research centre on multilingualism in South Africa, but receives little official recognition and support from the University of Cape Town. At national level, PRAESA has been centrally involved in assisting the government with designing the National Language Policy and Implementation Plan, as well as the Language Policy for Primary Schools in the Western Cape (2002). It also enjoys wide recognition from many international universities, with whom PRAESA runs joint research projects, for example, the Katholieke Universiteit Brabant (KUB) in Tilberg, Netherlands, the Centre for Language Studies, Malawi, the University of Antwerp, the University of Hamburg and the University of Reading, UK. It is also a founder member of the Multilingualism Action Group.

Funding

While PRAESA is almost totally dependent on outside funding, especially from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, it also generates some funding from consultation work to the government and other agencies, as well as from the sale of its many publications. At present, it has sufficient funding to complete its current projects, but this funding comes to an end in 2005. Unless additional funding is generated, the unit may close after that time, particularly as Dr Alexander, its most skilled and proficient fundraiser, will be retiring at that time. Apart from subsidy generated by its staff teaching on the postgraduate Diploma in Multilingual
Education, as well as its accommodation, electricity and certain discounts on materials, it receives no financial support from UCT.

Staffing

The Director

Dr Neville Alexander (Ph.D.), who has gained wide national and international recognition for his work in promoting multilingualism, is the director of PRAESA. His duties include:

- Fund-raising
- Serving as an advisor and consultant to government (he serves on various provincial and national language committees)
- Doing research in the field of language policy, and
- Supervising postgraduate students and presenting some of the PRAESA workshops.

The senior researchers

There are four senior researchers at PRAESA. Of these, two have doctoral degrees, while the others are in the process of completing their doctoral studies.

The ordinary researchers

There are also six ordinary researchers at PRAESA, who focus on fieldwork, doing research reports, terminology and materials development, language surveys and who do some teaching.

Although they are extremely dedicated and idealistic, the staff members are aware that they can only expect short-term contracts owing to PRAESA’s dependence on outside funding. Some remarked that they were unhappy about their level of pay, and that they were concerned about their future prospects once Dr Alexander retires.

The administrative staff

PRAESA has three contract administrative assistants – one for finance (reports to funders and finance dept of UCT, handling of client requests), one for general administration (financial system, orders, subsistence and allowances of students and academics, monitoring of funds) and one who manages the resource centre, conference administration, editing, distributing of materials, telephone support and preparation of publications.

Training and development offered

PRAESA offers programs in teacher development, particularly with its Multi-
lingual Demonstration Schools Project. It also presents a Further Diploma in Multilingual Education in conjunction with the UCT School of Education, which aims to equip teachers as proficient bilingual educators. In addition, members of its senior staff teach and supervise postgraduate students in the field of language and education at UCT and other universities.

Research projects

The research focus of PRAESA is on curriculum development, language planning and policy formulation at national and provincial levels. The main thrust of work since 1995 has been language policy in education as a component of the democratisation of South African society.

Income generation

The project charges consultation fees for work done for the Government and other NGOs. It also generates some income from its publications and the services rendered to schools. Client satisfaction with the work done by PRAESA appears to be quite high.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

When one compares the three centres, it is clear that the Language Centre at the University of Stellenbosch enjoys a much stronger and well-funded position than the other two centres. Iilwimi Centre at UWC can only plan one year ahead at a time, and finds it difficult to determine what its long-term prospects are. PRAESA is almost totally dependent on outside funding, and will come to a halt when such funding ceases.

Two other factors, which even impact on the Language Centre at SUN, are staff insecurity and the dependence of each centre on a strong central director. Well-qualified and experienced staff can generally move on to more secure jobs, taking their expertise with them. And directors of centres are also difficult to find. They need to be resourceful, flexible and energetic as well as being well-established academics in order to enhance the status of the centre and to attract funders and clients. In addition, Iilwimi Centre’s lack of a deputy director as well as senior research staff also makes its position a lot weaker in terms of staffing than the other two centres.

Some of the researchers and facilitators interviewed (particularly at PRAESA) believe that there appears to be insufficient interest from the parent universities in the type of strategic-applied research generated by these centres. There is also the tendency at some universities to view such centres as short-term projects (with a lifespan of 3–5 years), lasting only as long as available outside funding can sustain them. It is also clear that a strong dependence on the fluctuating market for
multilingual services is unwise, and that centres need to rely more on their research, academic teaching and training outputs for their long-term survival.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooper (2001, 53–4) makes several recommendations that can help research centres/units at Higher Education Institutions to remain viable. He draws these recommendations from the best practices he observed during his research. For this article, we have selected the recommendations appropriate for the centres being reviewed, based on our observations of best practices in these centres.

- It is important for the government, industry and Higher Education leaders as well as the academic community within Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) to see the ‘emerging development periphery’ of new research centres/units as part of a process linked to a quite substantial third revolution of universities internationally. It is a process described by Burton Clark (1998) as essential and needing to be nurtured if universities are creatively to adapt to current challenges posed by the wider society. In this regard, it is encouraging to see that the Language Centre at SUN is regarded as a priority by the rector of that university.
- It is vital for such research centres to have a full-time director, preferably at professorial level within a permanent post funded by the HEI and/or industry, or other organisations. This is already the case at two of the centres reviewed, but not for PRAESA. Dr Alexander has the status of ‘Visiting Professor’ and no tenure. His salary is funded by outside donors.
- It is important to create and develop a new career track of junior/senior researchers, whose primary identity is academic research, not ‘teaching research’, in order to release the creativity inherent in most research centres. The Language Centre at SUN and PRAESA are examples of this practice, but Iilwimi Centre definitely needs to draw in more academic researchers.
- Smaller centres, with a core of director plus two to four senior/ordinary researchers (one of which also acts as deputy director), are generally the most functional. These centres should not be dependent on single individuals, but rather on a ‘critical mass’ of individuals with appropriate administrative assistance.
- It is vital for such centres to have a clear and realistic mission on what it does and does not do, which should include clear teaching commitments at postgraduate level, especially for coursework masters programs around the centre’s field of expertise. This is already the case for PRAESA and the Language Centre at SUN. It is vital for Iilwimi Centre to involve more postgraduate students in its projects to provide them with essential fieldwork for their research.
- Such centres also need to be active in generating their own income. Despite the fluctuations reported earlier, there is in fact a growing demand for multilingual
language services, and clients generally regard language services offered by universities in a much better light than those offered by other agencies, because they believe that such services are backed up by sufficient research and academic expertise. However, this means that centres have to take account of best business practices in order to ensure the smooth running of its income-generation unit/s. Inevitably, this means that the directors and administrative support staff of such centres should be given some training in business administration.

Within the context of South Africa’s educational and linguistic needs at present, such centres have a very important role to play for the foreseeable future, particularly if there were to be strict implementation of the National Language Policy.

Acknowledgements:
The writer wishes to acknowledge the directors and staff of the different centres and her research assistant, Xolisa Tshongololo, for their assistance with this research project.

REFERENCES
Africa in Ideology and Language. In Ideology, politics and language policies: Focus on English, ed. T. Recento. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. (Note: references in text based on 1998 draft of this paper.)