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**UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTRES AT THE CORE OF
INTERNATIONALISATION AND ACADEMIC QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Abstract

University language centres (ULCs) are often positioned as auxiliary service units responsible for foreign language instruction and proficiency testing. Yet, intensified internationalisation, the spread of English-medium instruction (EMI), and rising expectations for academic staff to teach and publish in English have expanded their role to staff development, language policy implementation, and research-quality support. Building on language policy theory, the multi-competence perspective, and recent scholarship on EMI and university language centres, this review synthesises key strands of research and policy and proposes a conceptual framework that repositions ULCs as strategic institutional infrastructures. Evidence is drawn from peer-reviewed studies, cross-sector policy reports on institutional language policy in European higher education, and illustrative institutional policies and organisational models. The analysis highlights five interlinked domains of ULC contribution: (1) internationalisation at home and campus multilingualism; (2) learner and staff language development for EMI; (3) assessment, certification, and quality assurance; (4) academic literacy and research communication; and (5) language-policy mediation and governance. Persistent tensions between Englishisation and multilingual commitments, uneven governance visibility, and resourcing constraints remain key challenges. The paper concludes with propositions and a framework that can guide universities in integrating language centres into institutional strategy and quality assurance.

Keywords: *university language centres; internationalisation; multilingualism; language policy; English-medium instruction; academic writing; quality assurance.*

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has emerged as a core organizing principle in higher education, profoundly influencing institutional strategies, program design, student recruitment, mobility schemes, and research collaborations (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2018; de Wit et al., 2015). In this globalized landscape, language functions not merely as a neutral medium but as a constitutive infrastructure enabling participation in knowledge production and academic exchange (Piller & Cho, 2013). Yet universities grapple with reconciling 'Englishization', driven by English-medium instruction (EMI) and Anglophone publication norms, with commitments to multilingualism, linguistic justice, and local language protection (Jenkins, 2014). Critically, this tension risks exacerbating inequities: while EMI promises competitiveness and international appeal, it often overlooks lecturers' and students' linguistic preparedness, which imposes additional pedagogical burdens (Coleman, 2006; Dubow & Gundermann, 2017).

University language centres (ULCs) hold a pivotal yet under-recognized position amid these dynamics. Traditionally viewed as peripheral service units for foreign language courses and testing, ULCs are increasingly positioned as strategic actors in internationalization, language policy, and multilingual campus-building (Critchley & Wyburd, 2021). The EMI boom underscores this shift. While institutions frequently presume disciplinary faculty can seamlessly deliver content in English, empirical evidence reveals wide variability in communicative competence (Rizvić-Eminović & Dervić, 2025; Rizvić-Eminović et al., 2025), teaching efficacy, and quality assurance, which calls for targeted professional development (Airey et al., 2017; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018; Rizvić-Eminović & Hadžić, 2021). However, instead of support, many universities prioritize recruitment, which leaves ULCs to bridge gaps in staff training, student acclimation, and inclusive pedagogies (Macaro et al., 2018). The strategic contribution of ULCs is also supported by emerging empirical evidence. Previous studies report positive effects on student language development (Jegede, 2026; Tho & Phong, 2025), staff preparedness for EMI teaching (Margić & Janjetić, 2023), academic writing competence (Aizawa et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025), and institutional internationalisation readiness (Mananay et al., 2024; Margić & Janjetić, 2023).

This paper adopts an institutional theory perspective informed by language policy scholarship to analyse how university language centres respond to internationalisation demands while contributing to academic quality enhancement. In doing so, it contributes to current debates

on the strategic positioning of language support structures within higher education institutions. Thus, the review synthesizes recent scholarship and policy discourses on ULCs' evolving mandates, emphasizing European contexts (e.g., Bologna Process emphases on multilingual mobility; European Commission, 2020) alongside illustrative global practices. It advances two aims:

1. to map key research strands on ULC contributions to EMI support, language policy, and internationalization; and
2. to propose a conceptual framework framing ULCs as institutional infrastructures integrating language policy, teaching excellence, and research dissemination.

Further, this paper argues that ULCs should be reconceptualised not as peripheral service units but as strategic institutional infrastructures essential to multilingual governance and academic quality. Though rooted in Europe, the analysis highlights transferability to contexts, such as the Western Balkans, where ULCs remain emerging.

METHOD AND SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

In order to integrate key strands of scholarship and policy relevant to the evolving institutional role of university language centres (ULCs) in higher education, this study adopts a narrative review design with a conceptual synthesis orientation.

Relevant literature was identified through targeted searches of databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords including university language centres, language centres in higher education, English-medium instruction (EMI), institutional language policy, internationalisation, and academic quality. The search focused primarily on publications from 2000 to 2025, while allowing inclusion of earlier seminal works where conceptually relevant.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed studies explicitly addressing university language centres and their institutional roles; (2) EMI scholarship with clear implications for language-centre provision, such as staff development, assessment, and learner support; and (3) cross-sector, national, and institutional policy documents concerning multilingualism, internationalisation, and language governance in higher education, particularly within the European context. A total of 40 sources were selected for detailed review.

The selected material was analysed through thematic coding and interpretive synthesis. Recurring themes, institutional functions, and governance challenges were identified and compared across source types. This process informed the development of the conceptual framework presented in the paper, including five interrelated domains of university language centre contribution.

LANGUAGE POLICY AS INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Language policy research provides a productive lens for analysing how universities regulate and enact language choices across teaching, research, administration, and public engagement. Spolsky's model conceptualises language policy as an interaction of (i) language practices, (ii) beliefs/ideologies about language, and (iii) language management, or explicit interventions and regulation (Spolsky, 2004, 2012). Applied to higher education, this model highlights why formal language regulations may not translate into classroom and workplace realities: actual practices and local ideologies can reinforce or undermine policy intentions. ULCs become key institutional intermediaries because they are frequently tasked with operationalising policy through curricula, testing, staff training, and advisory functions, i.e., through language management at the institutional level.

Another important factor relevant for a language policy is the understanding of multilingualism not as parallel monolingualisms but as dynamic repertoires. The multilingual competence perspective treats knowledge of more than one language as a single, integrated system in the individual mind, with implications for identity, cognitive resources, and communicative practice (Cook & Li Wei, 2016; Rizvić-Eminović & Kasumagić-Kafedžić, 2024; Bureković et al., 2023). In universities, this view supports the argument that multilingual pedagogies can be compatible with high standards of learning within a discipline (Rizvić-Eminović et al., 2025) and with inclusive internationalisation. In the context of ULCs, the concept of multilingualism widens their role from “teaching languages” to shaping multilingual communicative environments and supporting plurilingual academic participation.

From an institutional language policy (ILP) perspective, the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) has reinforced the importance of university language centres (ULCs) as key structures for coordinating language support, staff development, and academic literacy provision. EMI is commonly defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in settings where

English is not the majority first language. Unlike CLIL, which explicitly integrates content and language learning objectives, EMI typically foregrounds disciplinary content and may lack explicit language-development goals (Blue, 2018). This distinction matters institutionally: where EMI is adopted without parallel language objectives, responsibility for language development is often displaced onto students and support structures rather than embedded in programme design. Recent EMI literature emphasises recurring challenges (e.g., comprehension difficulties, uneven classroom participation, language anxiety, and inconsistent pedagogy) and repeatedly recommends supplementary language support and faculty development as core mitigation strategies (Ahmed, 2025). These findings provide a strong rationale for ULC involvement in staff development, academic literacy provision, and the co-design of EMI quality assurance mechanisms.

Policy and research landscapes shaping ULC roles

A major strand of European policy-oriented literature frames ILP as an institution-wide governance instrument closely tied to internationalisation, quality assurance, and leadership alignment. The CEL-ELC *Higher Education Language Policy* (Lauridsen, 2013) offers a foundational template for institutional policy development, emphasising strategic coherence, institutional responsibility, and implementation through support mechanisms. In this document, language support is consistently treated as necessary infrastructure (courses, revision, translation, staff development), yet the organisational units responsible for these functions, typically language centres, are more often implied than analysed as actors. The dominant framing is therefore technical in nature: language provision appears as an institutional “measure,” while the ULC's role in governance and agenda-setting remains largely absent.

CercleS (2013) provides a contrasting and particularly relevant perspective because it explicitly positions language centres as key initiators and contributors to ILP development. The *Guidelines for Defining a Language Policy for Institutions in Higher Education* foreground language-centre expertise in policy formulation and implementation, making one of the strongest sector-level arguments for ULCs' strategic relevance. However, even this language-centre-driven framework tends to remain procedural: it explains what institutions should do and why language centres matter, but it rarely theorises how ULCs acquire legitimacy, negotiate institutional hierarchies, or act under competing pressures.

National-level surveys illustrate both the expansion of ILP and the persistent under-theorisation of ULCs. The German HRK report on institutional language policy (2019), based on a national survey and institutional examples, offers unusually concrete descriptions of implementation arrangements. In several cases, language centres appear as evidence-generating and coordinating nodes: conducting needs analyses, advising leadership, developing standards, coordinating training, and supporting monitoring. Yet these roles are described functionally rather than analysed conceptually. As a result, the political and organisational dynamics of ULC positioning within university governance remain mostly implicit.

A similar “macro-policy without implementation actor” pattern is visible in national foresight-style documents such as the KNAW report on Dutch and English in higher education (2017). The focus is on strategic language choice, quality, and societal implications; language support is acknowledged but not institutionally specified. Likewise, the Nordic Council of Ministers report on parallel language use (Gregersen et al., 2018) articulates principles for sustaining national academic languages alongside English and calls for explicit policies and monitoring, but it largely attributes responsibility to institutional leadership, leaving operational capacity under-specified.

Finally, internationalisation-oriented reports such as those by the European University Association (EUA) stress policy–practice alignment for mobility and international engagement. They recognise language support as enabling infrastructure, but provide limited theorisation of who institutionalises and governs that infrastructure. Across these genres, ULCs are intermittently mentioned but unevenly conceptualised: present in implementation but absent in theory.

Across the policy landscape, a recurring analytical gap emerges – language support is treated as necessary, while language centres are treated as optional or self-evident. This produces what may be termed an “assumed actor” problem. Namely, policy and governance texts frequently rely on ULC-like functions (testing, staff development, academic literacy provision, monitoring) while failing to conceptualise the organisational unit that provides them as a strategic institutional actor. This gap matters empirically and normatively. Empirically, it makes the institutional conditions of successful language policy implementation difficult to identify and compare. Normatively, it reinforces governance marginality even as institutional demands expand.

Evolving roles of university language centres: five domains of contribution

Internationalisation at home and multilingual campus development

Critchley and Wyburd (2021) argue that language centres should “seize the initiative” in internationalisation by evidencing their contribution to a broader interpretation of internationalisation than is often captured in institutional strategies. They link language-centre work to the skillset of the global graduate and position ULCs as contributors to multilingual and multicultural academic environments.

Institutional policies can also embed ULCs more explicitly in governance frameworks. The University of Luxembourg’s multilingualism policy, for example, defines an institutional language regime and specifies support measures such as placement testing, language courses, and guidance for students and staff, illustrating how language-centre functions can be institutionally codified rather than treated as optional add-ons (University of Luxembourg, 2020). Such policies demonstrate that multilingual commitments can be operationalised through concrete instruments, precisely the kind of language management infrastructure typically housed in ULCs.

Learner and staff language development for EMI

Recent scholarship has increasingly problematised EMI teacher development as a complex, hybrid, and contested process rather than a purely technical upskilling endeavour. In their critical review of empirical EMI teacher development studies (2018–2022), Wang, Yuan, and De Costa (2025) identify three dominant routes: formal training, teacher collaboration, and self-initiated professional practices. Crucially, they conceptualise EMI teacher development as continuous boundary-crossing across linguistic, pedagogical, cultural, and psychological domains shaped by institutional pressures and power relations.

This framing has direct implications for ULC positioning. Each route maps closely onto practices that language centres are well placed to coordinate. Those are structured training, peer observation and mentoring, communities of practice, and individual academic communication support. On this view, ULCs function as institutional mediators between policy expectations and classroom realities, supporting not only language proficiency but also pedagogical and interactional competence in EMI settings.

Assessment, certification, and quality assurance

Assessment functions remain central to ULC visibility: placement testing, proficiency certification, and benchmarking are common institutional responsibilities. However, the shift from student testing to staff-related quality assurance is especially significant for repositioning ULCs as core academic infrastructure. Dubow and Gundermann (2017) note that while language centres often ensure students meet language criteria, it is less common for them to certify lecturers' linguistic and communicative competence, partly because lecturer proficiency is frequently assumed. In response, the University of Freiburg Language Teaching Centre developed an EMI certification procedure to assess and certify the quality of language use in English-taught programmes, demonstrating how ULCs can move from ad hoc training provision to formalised standards and quality enhancement.

Unger-Ullmann (2018) further argues for evidence-based quality improvement in university language didactics, highlighting the value of systematically collected data to refine teaching and support institutional accountability. Under internationalisation agendas, such assessment infrastructures can be aligned with programme review and accreditation, reinforcing the argument that ULCs operate as quality assurance infrastructures rather than ancillary services.

Academic literacy and research communication

Internationalisation increasingly operates through research performance indicators and English-medium publication norms. Consequently, many institutions extend language-centre roles to academic writing, publication support, and research communication. Critchley and Wyburd (2021) explicitly connect language-centre work to research excellence, suggesting that ULCs can contribute to internationally oriented research goals through targeted academic literacy provision and support for multilingual research dissemination.

Organisational models such as applied language research centres further illustrate how language-related research and institutional practice can be integrated. The Centre for Applied Language Research at the University of Southampton, for example, represents a model in which research on language policy, language education, intercultural communication, and globalisation coexists with institutional engagement (Baird & Hyde-Simon, 2009). While not a ULC per se, this model supports the broader argument that language-related units can be positioned as academically generative rather than service-bound.

Policy mediation, governance, and institutional positioning

Even when universities adopt explicit language policies, implementation depends on mediating actors who translate strategic aspirations into practices and resources. Using Spolsky's framework, ULCs can be understood as language management agencies operating at the meso level: they interpret policies, create instruments (courses, tests, certification), advise departments on language demands, and help operationalise multilingual commitments. However, a recurring theme in both scholarship and policy is governance marginality. Language centres may remain outside core decision-making even as their workload expands, limiting their capacity to influence policy design, secure stable resources, or coordinate institution-wide approaches (Critchley & Wyburd, 2021).

The comparative policy literature reinforces this point. Namely, sector-level texts often describe language support as a necessary measure but under-specify the governance position of ULCs. Further, national reports sometimes describe substantial ULC involvement but tend not to theorise ULC agency. This combination produces institutional fragility and responsibility without authority.

Key tensions and strategic challenges

The reviewed literature suggests the following three persistent tensions shaping ULC positioning:

i) Englishisation vs. multilingualism

EMI growth may implicitly privilege English, while multilingualism policies emphasise linguistic diversity and inclusion. ULCs frequently operate at this fault line, balancing demands for English proficiency with support for local and additional languages, and advocating plurilingual practices aligned with institutional missions.

ii) Visibility and governance

When ULCs are conceptualised as service units, they may be excluded from strategic planning even as their role expands. This may produce fragile staffing models, project-based funding, and uneven influence over programme design and quality assurance.

iii) Standardisation vs. contextualisation

Certification and benchmarking support accountability, but must be adapted to disciplinary needs, institutional cultures, and diverse student/staff repertoires. Evidence-based quality

improvement implies locally meaningful indicators and iterative programme development (Unger-Ullmann, 2018).

A conceptual framework for positioning ULCs as strategic infrastructures

Synthesising the reviewed scholarship and policy landscape, this paper proposes a framework with five domains of ULC contribution and three conditions that would need to be met to enable such contribution of ULC, as follows:

Domains of contribution

1. Internationalisation at home and multilingual campus development (mobility preparation, multilingual events, intercultural communication support, campus language ecology).
2. EMI-related language development (student academic English support, discipline-specific literacy, staff development for EMI pedagogy).
3. Assessment and certification (placement, benchmarking, EMI teacher certification, programme-level language outcomes).
4. Academic literacy and research communication (academic writing, publication and grant-writing support, multilingual dissemination).
5. Policy mediation and advisory functions (policy input, guidance to departments, language-aware curriculum consultation).

Enabling conditions

1. Governance integration: formal representation of ULC leadership within internationalisation and quality assurance bodies; policy mandates tied to decision-making.
2. Stable resourcing: staffing models aligned with expanded role, including recognition of research/innovation work and sustained professional development.
3. Data-informed practice: routine collection and use of learning and performance data to support evidence-based programme improvement and accountability (Unger-Ullmann, 2018).

This framework may be used for developing indicators and testing relationships between ULC positioning and internationalisation or quality outcomes, as well as institutional self-assessment. Figure 1 below illustrates a causal institutional framework that explains how university language centres (ULCs) generate institutional impact when specific structural conditions are in place.

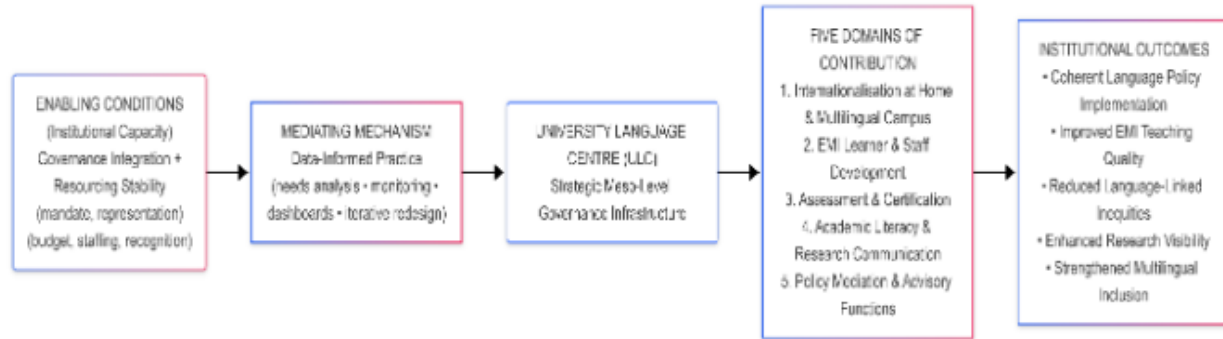


Figure 1. *University language centres as strategic institutional infrastructures*

The diagram conceptualises the role of university language centres (ULCs) as part of a broader institutional process linking governance conditions to measurable educational outcomes. The framework begins with enabling conditions, which represent the structural prerequisites necessary for a ULC to operate strategically within the university. These include institutional capacity factors such as governance integration and stable resourcing, reflected in clear mandates, representation within institutional decision-making structures, and sustainable funding for staffing and operations. Without these conditions, language support tends to remain fragmented or peripheral rather than strategically coordinated.

These enabling conditions support a mediating mechanism based on data-informed practice. In this stage, institutional actors analyse needs, monitor language-related challenges, and use diagnostic tools such as dashboards and evaluation processes to guide iterative programme redesign. This mechanism allows universities to move from reactive language support toward evidence-based language policy implementation.

At the centre of the framework is the University Language Centre, conceptualised as a strategic meso-level governance infrastructure. Positioned between institutional leadership and teaching units, the ULC acts as an organisational hub that coordinates language development activities across the university.

Through this position, ULCs contribute to five interrelated domains of institutional development. First, they support internationalisation at home and multilingual campus initiatives, facilitating the integration of international and local students. Second, they provide EMI learner and staff development, helping both students and lecturers navigate the linguistic and pedagogical demands of English-medium instruction. Third, ULCs manage assessment and certification systems, which ensure that language proficiency standards are aligned with institutional quality

assurance processes. Fourth, they support academic literacy and research communication, including academic writing and publication skills. Finally, they play an important role in policy mediation and advisory functions, translating institutional language policies into practical educational strategies.

The cumulative effect of these activities leads to several institutional outcomes. Universities can achieve more coherent implementation of language policies, improved quality in EMI teaching, and reduced language-related inequities among students. At the same time, strengthened academic communication skills contribute to enhanced research visibility and support the development of a more inclusive multilingual academic environment. Overall, the framework suggests that ULCs should not be understood merely as service units but rather as strategic institutional infrastructures that connect language policy, teaching development, and internationalisation processes within contemporary universities.

CONCLUSION

This review has argued that university language centres (ULCs) are becoming central components of the linguistic and pedagogical infrastructures that sustain internationalised higher education. Evidence from research on language centres (Critchley & Wyburd, 2021; Dubow & Gundermann, 2017), EMI teacher development (Wang et al., 2025), and data-informed quality enhancement (Unger-Ullmann, 2018) converges on a common conclusion: internationalisation and English-medium instruction cannot be sustained without systematic language support, staff development, assessment infrastructures, and institutional mechanisms for mediating language policy. Without such structures, EMI risks reproducing linguistic inequities among students and placing unrealistic communicative demands on academic staff. Conversely, emerging institutional multilingualism policies demonstrate how language-centre functions can be embedded within university governance through clearly defined mandates, resources, and responsibilities (University of Luxembourg, 2020).

Building on these insights, the article proposed a conceptual framework that positions ULCs as meso-level governance infrastructures linking language policy, academic development, and quality assurance. In this view, language centres are not merely service providers but institutional actors that coordinate multilingual practices across teaching, research, and administration.

Several directions for future research may follow. Empirical work is needed to document governance models that successfully integrate ULCs into institutional strategy; to evaluate EMI staff development and certification schemes in terms of pedagogical outcomes and student learning experiences; to investigate how ULC-led academic literacy initiatives relate to research communication and publication practices; and to extend comparative analysis to emerging higher education contexts, including regions where language centres are still developing, such as the Western Balkans.

More broadly, recognising ULCs as strategic infrastructures offers a way to connect language policy, internationalisation, and academic quality within a coherent institutional framework. In this sense, the future of internationalised higher education may depend not only on expanding English-medium programmes but on building institutional infrastructures, such as university language centres, which can sustain multilingual academic communication, equitable participation, and high-quality teaching.

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UNIVERZITETSKI JEZIČKI CENTRI U SREDIŠTU INTERNACIONALIZACIJE I AKADEMSKOG KVALITETA U VISOKOM OBRAZOVANJU: PREGLED I KONCEPTUALNI OKVIR

Sažetak

Univerziteti jezički centri često se pozicioniraju kao pomoćne servisne jedinice zadužene za nastavu stranih jezika i testiranje jezičke kompetencije. Međutim, intenzivirana internacionalizacija, širenje nastave na engleskom jeziku i sve veća očekivanja da akademsko osoblje predaje i objavljuje radove na engleskom jeziku proširili su njihovu ulogu na razvoj nastavnog osoblja, implementaciju jezičke politike i podršku kvaliteti istraživačkog rada. Oslanjajući se na teoriju jezičke politike, perspektivu višestruke jezičke kompetencije, te recentna istraživanja o nastavi na engleskom jeziku i univerzitetkim jezičkim centrima, ovaj rad sintetizira ključna istraživanja i politike, te predlaže konceptualni okvir koji univerzitetske jezičke centre pozicionira kao stratešku institucionalnu infrastrukturu. Analiza se temelji na recenziranim naučnim studijama, međusektorskim izvještajima o institucionalnim jezičkim politikama u evropskom visokom obrazovanju, te ilustrativnim institucionalnim politikama i organizacijskim modelima. Rezultati ukazuju na pet međusobno povezanih područja doprinosa univerzitetkih jezičkih centara: (1) internacionalizacija na kampusu i višejezičnost u akademskoj zajednici; (2) razvoj jezičkih kompetencija studenata i nastavnog osoblja za nastavu na engleskom jeziku; (3) procjena jezičkog znanja, certificiranje i osiguranje kvalitete; (4) akademska pismenost i komunikacija u istraživanju; te (5) posredovanje u jezičkoj politici i institucionalno upravljanje.

Istovremeno, trajne napetosti između anglizacije i opredijeljenosti za višejezičnost, neujednačena institucionalna vidljivost u upravljanju i ograničeni resursi ostaju ključni izazovi. Rad završava nizom prijedloga i konceptualnim okvirom koji mogu pomoći univerzitetima u integriranju jezičkih centara u institucionalne strategije i sisteme osiguranja kvalitete.

Ključne riječi: *univerzitetski jezički centri; internacionalizacija; višejezičnost; jezička politika; nastava na engleskom jeziku (EMI); akademsko pisanje; osiguranje kvalitete.*