

THE challenge of English as a medium of instruction at higher education institutions

– where English opens up knowledge and global opportunities to students, but can also be discriminatory and exclusionary – is a challenge shared by many countries. Speakers from South Africa, Turkey and Pakistan all voiced similar concerns.

Russell Kaschula, professor of African language studies at Rhodes University, said there is no doubt that using English as a medium of instruction has vastly increased Rhodes's international profile and the number of students coming from abroad to study in South Africa.

At the same time, it has an adverse effect on access, success and retention of students whose first language is not English.

Gölge Seferoğlu, dean of education at the Middle East Technical University in Turkey, and Roger Smith, director of the English Language Enhancement Network at Aga Khan University, Pakistan, discussed similar language challenges at their universities.

Smith said English language proficiency has enabled faculty members to go overseas to do post graduate study and forge important links and networks.

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LANGUAGES

of tuition remain controversial



WELL-ENDOWED: At richer universities, English language proficiency has enabled faculty members to go overseas to do postgraduate study and forge important links and networks. This leads to collaborative projects between universities, exchange visits for students and international job opportunities.

opportunities.

Half of Pakistan's nurses, for example, go overseas to work, and English skills are a major factor enabling them to do that.

However, Smith said the problem with English medium instruction is that it restricts access for local students, and governments and universities need to work out how to widen access when there is an unattainable standard that can often only be reached if students have gone to an elite school.

Seferoğlu said that in Turkey, students can choose

the language of instruction at English or Turkish or mixed-language universities.

But there is demand for English-medium universities and programmes as they offer better job prospects.

Kaschula said there is no doubt language affects access, success and retention.

He said 70% of black students fail first year at Rhodes, and English, which is a second or foreign language for many of them, is often a major factor. Universities need to look at how to use languages to retain students rather than push them out "so

they can be global citizens and work with local reality on the ground as well".

Kaschula said it was wrong to assume that teaching content in English leads to proficiency as it ends up with educational institutions examining proficiency in English rather than in, for example, maths.

It is also a myth that total immersion in a language leads to proficiency, he said.

A study in his department on 60 schools in rural Transkei that are teaching maths in isiXhosa has shown that teaching in first language is

beneficial.

Looking at progress over the past four years, the pass rate has improved from 30% to 60% and, at the same time, English marks at those schools are better than where English is used as the medium of instruction.

He said this showed that one can be taught in one's mother tongue while transitioning to English, and that grade 4, where this transition is currently made, is too early to do this.

Smith said that in Pakistan, Urdu is the dominant language of education in the primary and secondary sector.

At universities, English is the assumed medium of instruction, but that's not necessarily what is going on on the ground.

"One of the problems is language ability not only of students but of teachers," he said. This has implications for learning outcomes.

"The Pakistan government response is to try to improve the level of English.

"But there are questions of whether that is the best approach and that there needs to be better alignment of the country's language policies and the missions of universities.

The speakers said there needed to be clearer language policies, and a renewed focus on training teachers.

This is a summary of perspectives expressed at the Going Global conference's session on English as a medium of instruction



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TO BE OR NOT TO BE? The challenge of English as a medium of instruction at higher education institutions is that it can open up knowledge and global opportunities to students, but can also be discriminatory and exclusionary.