Summary Business German in Ireland Working Group (BuGi) Conference – Royal Irish Academy, 4 March 2016

*Darum Deutsch* – German Languages Needs and Skills in Ireland

In order to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Business German in Ireland Working Group (BuGI) a conference took place in the Royal Irish Academy, which was organised together with the Goethe Institut Dublin (see appendix for media coverage on the event). The organisers Andreas Zürn (Goethe Institut) and Gisela Holfter (BuGI) introduced the event.

German Ambassador

EU & free movement & free trade, but languages are needed. 51% of secondary schools in the EU offer the study of two languages.

Germany is the 3rd biggest trading partner for Ireland; selling products: need to know the language of the customer. Companies in Ireland contact the German Embassy, looking for staff with German language skills. Most scientific publications are in German; also important for the Tourism industry in Ireland.

Swiss Ambassador

Importance of multilingualism for Switzerland > economic advantage & good investment, responsible for 10% of Swiss GDP. English is given priority, but learning new languages also means getting to know new cultures.

Austrian Ambassador

The embassy actively promotes mother tongue and Austrian culture. The asset of native speakers in call centres. Language learning and the connection to culture; the way we think; for example, formal and informal way of addressing other people.

Derek Scally, *Irish Times*

Studying at DCU: Journalism and German; German changed his life. Language learning is the not only the key but also the door and frame.

Advantages of German language skills for young Irish people:

1. Good job
2. Think differently & mobile
3. Away from home but not too far.

The learning of German is supported by Embassies, the Goethe-Institut Irland and DAAD, but the private sector has to step in. Companies that need Graduates with German should become active sponsors. For example, he suggested that companies partner a secondary school and sponsor a trip to Berlin. See German outside the economic box. When the economy is doing well, people stop learning German; this does not make sense if Ireland wants to establish new markets. Derek also knows a lot of Irish people living in Germany who would be willing to come to Ireland and talk about their experience.

Derek’s preferred slogan: Learn German – you know it makes sense!

Panel I: The Employers’ Perspective: Liam Ryan (SAP); Ralf Lissek (Irish-German Chamber of Commerce) and Damien Owens (Engineers Ireland Registrar); Ingrid Miley (RTE) chaired both afternoon sessions

**Ingrid**: This is a topic very close to her heart. Recalls going to Berlin to cover the fall of the Wall as she was the only German speaker in the Today Tonight office at that time.

**Liam:** 149 Native German speakers as employees; in Galway there are 25 languages spoken and 40 nationalities. 25% of employees are Irish, the rest is international. Using German speaking staff in Budapest.

**Ralf:** Five weeks ago at Job Fair in Dresden – 280 CVs from German people; 60 companies in Ireland looking for staff with German language skills; for example, 60% in customer services & call centres; 25% in sales; 15% in finance, accounting, IT. Companies in Ireland who are contacting the Chamber of Commerce for staff with German language skills: Paypal, Hertz; Google; etc.

**Damien:** global market < > no German for Engineers at third level in Ireland. There are about 60.000 Engineers needed in Germany. Mobility in EU not used due to lack of language skills; mobility is often only to Anglophone speaking countries; for example, 15% of members work overseas. Modern languages should be taught at primary and secondary level in Ireland. English will become a minority language, if UK leaves the EU.

**All participants** agreed that language learning should start at primary level. There is no easy solution to the lack of language learning in Ireland. Parents need to be more involved. They also agreed that work placements are an opportunity for language learning.

**Liam** talked about SAP’s apprenticeship programme: sponsorship of five LC students who study towards a Computer Science Degree in Germany. SAP and the German government are sponsors.

A participant from the audience (DIT) mentioned “mandatory work placements” for their students in Sciences. 20% would be in Germany. Students find their own placements and show no resistance to going abroad. Also, a BuGI member (NUI Galway) drew attention to the problem that First Year pupils have to choose between foreign languages and referred to the timetabling difficulties and packed curricula at second level.

Panel II: Economy and Education: Philip Nolan (NUIM), Gerry O’Sullivan (HEA), Tony Donohoe (IBEC), Emma Gorman (Tourism Ireland)

**Philip:** basic language skills have to be already established before going on Erasmus+. Internationalisation > skills strategy, work of world opportunities for learners in Ireland and yes, English is a challenge.

**Tony:** Indigenous market: companies do not know what they don’t know; sell in customer’s language. Companies are losing out on profit. We need to promote apprenticeships.

**Emma:** German tourism market is the third biggest in the world (after China & US) and largest non-English language market (after US & UK) for Ireland. 629,000 German tourists visited Ireland in 2015; there could be a lot more. Bus operators, bus/coach industry and tour guides need languages and the marketing needs to be done in German. Short-sighted: no languages in the Tourism sector. Perhaps there should be a compulsory language component? German often has an image problem; we should sell German culture.

**Philip:**  Should study of German be mandatory? Language is not discussed at primary level by the DES – why? Language level does not always have to be native speaker one. A lot will depend on the stance taken at ministerial level. We need more teachers who can work and play with language. Business students with a language and cultural knowledge are more employable. Shall we give “extra bonus” points for studying a language at secondary level? Example of Aberdeen University where all students have to take a language and a technical subject/maths.

**Gerry:** Language has not been at the core of our educational system; we cannot just “blame” Irish, especially as the students of Gaelscoils often achieve excellent results in German and French. It is a matter of perception; for example, language learning is difficult. He also noted that the crucial role that teachers play in fostering love of a subject.

**Tony:** Opportunity cost or lost? 1500 hours of learning Irish. Languages are not taught together. Language skills: at a functional level: liberator, but at a fluency level: inhibitor. Fluency not always needed for jobs; cultural awareness is also important. A Language Advisory Board, composed of teachers and also of business leaders, was needed > waiting for the National Language Policy by the DES. What do we want to achieve?

Appendix: Irish Times article about the event, Mon, Mar 7, 2016, Business section

<http://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/efforts-to-build-world-economy-limited-by-lack-of-languages-1.2562407>

Efforts to build world economy limited by lack of languages

Conference told thousands of vacancies not being filled by Irish because of lack of German and other languages

Derek Scally

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Ireland’s efforts to build a globalised economy are unsustainable in the long run, given its failed foreign language education policy, particularly in German, according to Irish business leaders and academics.

Heads of multinational companies operating in Ireland say they cannot understand why they are forced to go outside the state to recruit the thousands of multilingual staff they need.

Employers organisation Ibec, meanwhile, said Ireland’s foreign language failure was “the most intractable of policy challenges” that was hobbling growth potential of both home-grown companies and of the Irish economy.

“Ireland’s indigenous sector has psychologically switched off to certain markets and they don’t got further for cultural and linguistic reasons,” said Tony Donohue, head of education and social policy at Ibec. “Ireland’s globalised business model is not sustainable . . . unless we get an indigenous exporting base.”

The warning came at a conference in Dublin marking the 15th anniversary of the Business German in Ireland (BuGI) working group, representing more than a dozen third-level institutions in Ireland teaching German.

Speakers at the conference in the Royal Irish Academy said closing the gap between Irish aspirations and the Irish reality in language teaching could bring a considerable economic boost.

Swiss ambassador to Ireland Marie-Claude Meylan said studies had quantified her country’s multilingualism – in particular German, French and Italian – as being responsible for a 10 per cent share of the national economy worth Swiss francs 642 billion (€587 million) in 2014.

Leading business lobby groups in Ireland said thousands of job vacancies could not be filled with Irish graduates because of their chronic lack of German and other languages. “The reality is that we are going to Germany to recruit Germans for roles in Ireland, an absurd situation,” said Ralf Lissek, chief executive of the German-Irish Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

A fresh push for early foreign language teaching was backed by almost all speakers at the conference. Damien Owens, registrar of Engineers Ireland, said just one or two of 21 engineering courses in Ireland offered a language component, meaning that Irish engineering graduates were missing out on ease of labour mobility within Europe.

As companies and educators wait for a delayed Department of Education strategy paper, academics proposed fresh incentives – including Leaving Cert bonus points – for students who take foreign languages.