

Language and Culture Aware SEAMK as a Strength of the Higher Education Community

30.12.2025

Language policies in universities of applied sciences are a cornerstone of modern higher education operations. They embody the principles of language and culture awareness and the shared responsibility of the entire academic community for related practices and values. Languages and cultures coexist, and an international higher education environment is shaped by a landscape of multiple languages and cultures. In autumn 2025, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (SEAMK, i.a.) introduced the Language and Culture Aware SEAMK operational model, which extends language awareness to include cultural sensitivity in university activities.

Expert work emphasises linguistic interaction and the understanding of multicultural and multilingual environments. At SEAMK, we operate multilingually, using clear standard language in both Finnish and English. Our language and culture aware policies are applied equally across all areas of university activity, fostering an appreciative and responsible operational culture. Our aim is to create a genuinely international SEAMK, where language and culture awareness is evident in all activities – teaching, RDI work, services, and administration. Language policies guide us to recognise each individual's language skills and the wishes and needs related to language learning. Thus, at SEAMK, both language and culture awareness have been established as guiding principles.

SEAMK's Language and Culture Aware Policies:

- Are based on the principles of language awareness,
- Affect all activities and all members of the community,

- Outline our approach to language learning, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and parallel language use,
- Make visible how language and culture are considered within the university community, and
- Form a documented whole on SEAMK's website and practical guidelines on SEAMK's Intranet for staff use.

A language and culture aware operational culture extends to everyday life, and through it, we at SEAMK wish to promote inclusion and a sense of belonging for all. Additionally, these policies support multilingualism and language learning as part of daily life and collaboration. We also consider it important to strengthen the global competence of our community members.

National recommendations emphasise the same direction. According to (Karvi) (Huusko ja Nurkka, 2024) future teaching and its development should increasingly focus on sustainable development, internationalisation, interdisciplinarity, and lifelong learning – and consider the perspectives of multilingualism and language awareness. The Vision for Higher Education and Research 2030 (Ministry of Education and Culture, i.a.) also highlights the equal status of international students and staff, which is supported by strengthening community spirit and a clear language strategy and language training provision.

SEAMK's Language and Culture Aware Policies

The SEAMK's language and culture aware policies (SEAMK, i.a.) have been developed collaboratively, bringing together different fields of expertise, students, and multidisciplinary professionals. The working group contributed a diverse range of perspectives, strengthening the SEAMK-centric nature of the policies and consideration of community needs.

The policies presented here form the foundation for SEAMK's language and culture aware operational culture. They guide everyday practices and set a common direction for the entire community.

- **Equity**
  Equity is a core value at SEAMK, which we implement by strengthening language and cultural awareness and engaging the entire community. We operate openly and equally, learn together, and provide opportunities to grow in a multilingual and culturally rich environment, both locally and globally.
- **Appreciation**
  We appreciateone another, as well as the languages and cultures within our community. We promote language- and culture-aware practices and competencies across all areas of activity.
- **Inclusion**
  We enhance members' inclusion and participation in the community by recognising the importance of languages and cultures. We act flexibly and develop our community to be linguistically and culturally inclusive.
- **Multilingualism**
  We operate multilingually, according to everyone's language skills and abilities. We use clear standard language in both Finnish and English. We support language learning and studying by offering opportunities to learn languages. We utilise technology to support interaction.
- **Resilience**
  We strengthen the community's resilience by enhancing the ability to operate flexibly in a diverse environment both locally and globally through shared learning and renewal. We support the development of staff and learners into active local and global contributors.
- **Responsibility**
  We act responsibly and commit collectively to the community's competence, regional success, and social sustainability. We promote linguistically and culturally responsible practices, develop our expertise, and create open, well-being-supporting practices in everyday interaction.
- **Encouragement**
  We serve as an encouraging example of language- and culture-aware work and organisational culture in the region and beyond – we engage our partners and openly share our values and practices. We all act as mediators of language and culture in teaching, project work, and interaction for the benefit of the entire

region.

It is important to emphasise what the language policies are not. They are not:

- “Compulsory English” – the policies do not require the use of English, but make the presence of languages more visible and help to consider appropriate language choices for different situations.
- “Compulsory Finnish” – the policies do not emphasise Finnish as the primary norm, but support an inclusive university community. A sense of belonging has been shown to strengthen the learning of Finnish.

Competence Strengthens Connections in Networks and Between Individuals

Promoting internationalisation and enabling inclusion for every community member are central values at SEAMK. An increasingly international operational environment increases the need for strong language and culture aware competence, and our goal is for both students and staff to feel like active participants in this development and to be able to develop their skills as needed.

Collaboration with international networks, such as the European HEROES Alliance, and regional partners is deepening continuously. Regional companies are also operating more globally, which highlights the need for multilingual and culturally sensitive competence. SEAMK supports this development by acting as an encouraging example in the region and by providing capabilities that strengthen students’ and staff’s ability to operate and work in diverse environments.

Why is this important at SEAMK?

SEAMK’s own policies are built on the same principles as scientific research on the topic (see Honko & Kilpeläinen, 2025; Kovalainen, 2025; Kinossalo et al., 2022; Lehtonen & Saarinen, 2022): language awareness increases equity, strengthens inclusion, and supports international activities.

A language and culture aware, culturally sensitive, and internationally supportive operational culture directly responds to national recommendations. The Karvi (Huusko ja Nurkka, 2024) report highlights clear development needs and recommendations directly linked to this work:

- Universities of applied sciences are encouraged to systematically consider internationalisation, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and language awareness in both teaching and everyday practices.
- Every higher education student should acquire international, multicultural, language, and diversity competence, as working life is increasingly international. The importance of these skills for employability should be made visible, and alumni experiences should be utilised in guidance.
- Teaching staff should be encouraged to engage in internationalisation at home, international cooperation, language awareness, and consideration of multiculturalism in teaching and guidance. This should be reflected in objectives, development discussions, and career paths.
- Teachers should be offered sufficient opportunities to develop their language skills and participate in international cooperation. International staff also support students’ internationalisation.

A language and culture aware operational culture is not just a strategic choice, but a necessity for a university operating in global networks and its community members. We want to create a genuinely international SEAMK, where language and culture awareness is visible in all activities – teaching, RDI work, services, and administration. Therefore, the language policy documentation was expanded to include culturally responsive

practices.

In practice, these objectives are realised through the development of competence and practices both as a community and at the individual level. The policies provide practical support for both planned and unexpected situations. Language practices can be agreed upon together: which languages are used and in which situations. Linguistic flexibility and multilingualism become a natural part of everyday activities.

A multilingual and culturally sensitive operational culture improves the opportunities for international students and staff to participate in discussions, work tasks, and decision-making. The experience of inclusion, in turn, supports language learning and strengthens the sense of belonging to the community (Intke-Hernandez, 2020).

Background and Comparison – What is Done Elsewhere?

Language and culture awareness has become a key area of development in Finnish higher education institutions. Many organisations have already created their own policies, strategies, and concrete operational models, and SEAMK is part of this development.

Kielibuusti (i.a.) offers practical solutions for supporting the learning of domestic languages, among other things. The language strategy model presented in *Kielibuusti* serves as a guiding tool for organisations, helping them to define language practices for different contexts and to develop systematic approaches to support language learning. The aim is to promote inclusion, safety, and accessible multilingual interaction.

The language strategy (Komppa et al., August 2024) is a practical instrument that guides an organisation's everyday operations. It helps to address key questions such as:

- What are the organisation's official working languages?
- How are the different language backgrounds of clients and stakeholders considered?
- How is language learning supported and the implementation of the strategy monitored?

Other higher education institutions have also developed their own policies and examples for building a multilingual operating culture. These include, for example, the language policies of Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and the revised language policies of Aalto University, both of which encourage active multilingualism. The Language Campus at the University of Jyväskylä approaches multilingualism from a new perspective and emphasises community as an integral part of everyday academic life. The university's strategy highlights ethically sustainable education and research, as well as the appreciation of diversity. This approach fosters an understanding of the significance of multilingualism from the perspectives of both learning and communal engagement.

Making the Work Visible by Involving Staff

The launch of activities in accordance with language and culture aware policies began with a Kick-off event

for all staff in autumn 2025. The event highlighted SEAMK community members' own experiences, perspectives, and concrete insights. The programme included an introduction to SEAMK's language and culture aware policies and their key principles, staff and student presentations on everyday language and culture awareness, and staff sharing linguistic and cultural insights. In addition, there was dialogue with students, a commentary on linguistic and cultural experiences, and a joint discussion on the language and culture aware community and its development.

The aim of the event was to clarify the significance of the policies, strengthen shared understanding, and make visible the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the SEAMK community. At the same time, an operational approach was launched to ensure that the policy work becomes a participatory and shared process for the entire SEAMK community.

Team Rounds and Experience Stories Make Activities Concrete

As language and culture aware operational culture is a broad concept, its adoption and practical application require time and shared interpretation. Therefore, to promote the implementation of the policies, teams are invited to share thoughts, experiences, and practices on what the policies could mean in their work and context. Practical examples are collected by systematically visiting each team – first staff teams and then students.

The purpose of the team rounds is to consider concretely what the policies mean in SEAMK's everyday life and how they affect all activities, such as:

- Competence development and general skills work,
- Pedagogy and curriculum development,
- Guidance and student services,
- Service work and administrative processes,
- Communication and marketing, and
- Physical and digital environments (signs, notices, documents, forms of interaction).

The discussions examine the policies one at a time. The aim is to create a shared toolkit for what each policy means in the SEAMK context and what practical measures it requires. Teams' expertise and ideas are shared with the entire community.

Examples of Practices – Insights Gathered from Team Rounds

During the team rounds, numerous practical suggestions and solutions have already emerged, enabling language and culture awareness to become a natural part of SEAMK's everyday life. Below are some small examples highlighted in discussions.

Multichannel and Accessible Communication

- Clear standard language in Finnish and English – and, where necessary, in other languages.
- Bilingual notices, instructions, and forms.
- Model answers (Finnish–English) for frequently asked questions prepared for team use.
- Multichannel communication (text, images, videos) supports accessibility and inclusion.
- Culturally and linguistically sensitive communication also in informal situations.

Utilising Technology to Support Language and Interaction

- Technological aids and visual supports.
- Applications for translating speech into different languages.
- Bilingual presentation slides – AI and translation engines as aids.
- AI tutor in Moodle in test use, and its potential roles are being explored.

Language and Culture Aware Encounters in Everyday Life

- Considering language choices during breaks, conversations, and informal situations.
- Different language skills are accepted and encouraged to be utilised.
- Cultural diversity is seen as an asset.
- No assumptions are made about language use: it is always possible to ask which language the other person prefers to communicate in.
- Aids can be used as appropriate.

Bilingual Teaching and Study Support

- Parallel language practices in teaching (greetings, basic vocabulary, linguistic inputs).
- Opportunity to participate in teaching with different language skills – word lists, visual supports, and structurally clear teaching.
- Bilingual materials and instructions.
- Understanding that direct translations do not always work – contextual clarification is needed.

Structures and Processes

- Parallel bilingualism as a built-in principle.
- Clear language practices within teams and language choices agreed upon according to situations.
- Compiling practices and tips into the intranet as an easy-to-use toolkit.
- Team-specific discussions on the application of policies – strengthening shared interpretation and competence.

Conclusion

Language and culture awareness at SEAMK is not just a way of being, but above all a way of acting. It strengthens the community’s resilience, improves the quality of interaction, and lays the foundation for genuinely international cooperation. It is shared competence that belongs to all of us and whose effects are visible in both everyday smoothness and strategic development.

The objectives of the recommendations presented above and SEAMK’s own policies clearly move in the same direction: we are building a university where language and culture awareness is both a strategic strength and an everyday practice. The work continues and deepens as part of team-based development, shared learning, and ongoing dialogue. Together, we are building an even more open, inclusive, and international SEAMK.

Language and culture aware competence is a key part of contemporary society and working life. It not only enables smoother interaction and collaboration, but also serves as a strategic strength that supports the community, networks, and regional vitality. Every one of our students graduates into a globally networked world. The Language and Culture Aware SEAMK operational model provides the capabilities to build

sustainable connections between different people and actors.

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