

SRC submission to Council of Senate Meeting 11th December 2014

SRC Response to the Senate Assessors for Student Conduct Report on the Use of Translation Dictionaries in Examinations

**Ruth Brown, PG Taught Convenor
Breffni O'Connor, SRC President**

Introduction

Following lengthy debate at the last SSDC meeting of 7th November 2014, an indicative vote on prohibition of student access to translation dictionaries in examinations showed a 50/50 split in members' views on the proposal. Given the unanimous opposition to this proposal by student representatives on the committee and the SRC's belief that the proposal is not fully thought through, potentially unfair on all non-native speakers of English and based on incomplete information, we wish to register our concerns with Council of Senate and request that the prohibition is not implemented at this point, and instead that our recommendations are considered further

Overview

From the latest discussion at SSDC and previous work undertaken we can make the following observations:

- There is consensus across the University that many students currently accepted onto courses of study do not possess the level of English necessary to produce high quality exam scripts.
- There are inconsistencies across university colleges in whether or not marks are deducted for linguistic errors, and if so, by what margin, with some adopting a 'zero-tolerance' approach to spelling/written language inaccuracies and others being more lenient in their approach. It can be argued that translation dictionaries 'level the playing field' for students to some degree.
- There appears to be little understanding as to how this prohibition will be implemented in the context of the University's Transnational Education initiatives and what bearing it will have, for example on students of the Singapore Campus.

Report of Senate Assessors

We believe that the paper entitled “Report from Senior Senate Assessor for Student Conduct – Policy on the Use of Translation Dictionaries in Examinations”, hereafter referred to as “The Report” was not entirely correct in its interpretation in several areas. As follows

- **Equal Opportunities.**

The report coversheet suggested the changes would be positive when, in fact, the opposite is the case, as can be seen in an extract sent from the EDU to the Senate office following a query by the SRC:

“The EDU would like to highlight a consideration with the coversheet for the SSDC paper entitled Report from Senior Senate Assessor for Student Conduct – Policy on the Use of Translation Dictionaries in Examinations. The coversheet states the proposed changes would have a positive equality impact; however the EDU would suggest this is a misinterpretation of this section of the form. The Equality Implications section relates to impacts based upon the nine protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010. Within the terms of the Act, allowing students who have English as a second language a translational dictionary could be considered a positive action measure under the protected characteristic of Race (which covers nationality), and therefore fully compliant with the Act, and may be considered good practice.”

- **Comparison with practice across the Russell Group institutions**

The list of institutions highlighted in The Report identifies universities that prohibit the use of dictionaries in examinations, or allow them only in specific circumstances. However, some institutions, listed as having policies banning the use of dictionaries, can be seen to permit the use of dictionaries certain circumstances.

In particular, a number of institutions allow ERASMUS students to use dictionaries. In consideration of this, the University would not necessarily be enforcing a similar policy as other Russell Group institutions if a total ban on the use of dictionaries was brought in. Additionally, ERASMUS students are admitted to the University if they have achieved CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) B2 Level which equates roughly to 5 to 6.5 IELTS (International English Language Testing System). ERASMUS students therefore may have a lower level of English, than other students, and therefore would be disproportionately disadvantaged if denied the use of a translation dictionary during an examination.

Furthermore, some of the institutions listed in the Appendix of The Report have higher English language requirements for UG entry, and are therefore not all comparable to the student population at Glasgow University. As noted in the Report, students admitted to the University must have an IELTS score of 6.5, whereas the following institutions have a higher entry level, or higher entry level for certain subjects.

Universities with a minimum requirement of 7.0 or 7.5 IELTS:	
Cambridge Oxford	London School of Economics

Universities with a minimum requirement of 7.0 or 7.5 IELTS in specific subject areas:	
Edinburgh Birmingham Brunel Keele Kings College London	Exeter Manchester Queen Mary University London University College London

As such, the impact of a blanket ban on the use of dictionaries in examinations may have a more negative impact on students at the University than it has on students at other institutions.

- **Procedures, training, management**

The report states

“The current process in circumstances where 25 or more dictionaries are to be used, whereby students are required to submit a declaration form and then a list of students doing so is passed to the Invigilators for cross-checking in the examination room, is not being followed in practice”

It then cites a range of operational, resource and management issues associated with following the **correct** procedure and concludes

“We are now in the position where our current policy is adequate only for Schools where a small number of students wish to use a dictionary, and is unworkable where larger student numbers are involved. In the latter case, substantial numbers of students are therefore using dictionaries in examinations that are subject to no checks other than spot-checks by Invigilators, and this is clearly insufficient.”

Although the report identifies a range of issues associated with current processes there is no real effort directed at solutions. In the end it simply concludes that the supply of dictionaries is “unworkable”.

- **Cheating**

The report suggests that the dictionary itself is a temptation which prompts students to cheat.:

“To summarise: exam cheating compromises the University's standards, is unfair to the bulk of the student body, and sometimes lands students in situations in which they will lose their degree just because they have taken into the exam the ‘security blanket’ of a marked-up dictionary, even though the dictionary might not have been consulted”.

We believe that the above statement is somewhat disingenuous. We believe that if a minority of students are intent on cheating, they will do so regardless, and will find many ingenious ways in which they can bring unauthorised material with them to the exam. Instead, we recommend that the university does more to communicate the severity of breaking student conduct codes and to increase the awareness of the possible consequences of this behaviour. Contrary to what is stated above, a prohibition on dictionaries is unfair to all the students who we believe are the majority, and have no intention of cheating in exams, but would be denied support which they require.

We fail to be convinced of the claim that cheating is caused by dictionaries. Whilst it is accepted that a number of students have been referred to the Senate Assessors for violating examination regulations with regards the use of dictionaries, it must be stressed that this number represents a tiny minority of students. However, we are more concerned that prohibition of dictionaries will impact on the many thousands of non-native English speakers, among the student population.

Conclusion

We believe that the proposal has not been fully thought through as an institutional problem. We are concerned that the majority of students will suffer owing to fears which apply to a small minority of students. We would hope that the University policy could be reworked towards benefitting students and doing more to deter cheating in other, more effective, ways.

Recommendations

That the University undertakes a proper, informed review of current practices and identifies means of retaining current policy.

The review should include:

- a) Training requirements of invigilators and costing of the employment of additional invigilators to be on full alert for cheating of any sort.
- b) Resource implications of stocking translation dictionaries for students who register a need to have one in advance of the examination period.
- c) Identification of effective practice in managing the provision of translation dictionaries amongst institutions whose policy permits such provision.
- d) Consideration of potential for innovative solutions such as the use of electronic dictionaries to address the cheating issue.

On a broader level the review should also include:

- e) An appraisal of current marking criteria with a view to establishing consistency across schools regarding penalising students for linguistic errors. We also believe that students should be fully informed of the weighting of this particular criterion.
- f) Consideration of the benefits of additional resources being allocated to training/workshops in English language for all students whose first language is not English at both UG and PG level.

Ruth Brown and Breffni O'Connor
Monday, 17 November 2014

Appendix

Institutions previously identified as not allowing dictionaries in examinations or only allowing dictionaries where the examination rubric permits their use, which appear to allow dictionaries in other specific circumstances:

University of Edinburgh

'During an examination, students **will be permitted** to use only such dictionaries, other reference books, computers, calculators and other electronic technology as have been issued or specifically authorised by the examiners.'

<https://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/registry/exams/ExamHallRegs.pdf>

University of Birmingham

'Only students whose first language is not English **will be permitted** to use a standard, unannotated, and unmarked dictionary during their examinations (except where the question paper rubric specifically forbids their use).'

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/cladls/exams/ontheday/dictionary.aspx>

University of Durham

The policy on the use of dictionaries is decided by subject areas:

'All examination papers in Mathematical Sciences now include the statement that

- **Visiting Erasmus students are permitted dictionaries.**

This should be taken to refer only to language dictionaries and not to mathematical dictionaries.'

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/mathematical.sciences/teaching/handbook/assessment/examsinfo/>

University of Exeter

'The use of dictionaries during exams is NOT allowed unless specified on the exam paper. **International and Erasmus students are allowed to use foreign language - English dictionaries** provided they have written authorisation from their College (using the appropriate blue form).'

<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/administration/examsandassessment/ugpgt/guidanceforcandidates>

University of Manchester

'Students whose first language is not English **are allowed to use a language translation dictionary** if they are studying a Foundation Year (or other programme) where a recognised and assessed English Language module that must be passed satisfactorily forms part of that programme.

'Visiting students whose first language is not English (e.g. Erasmus or other exchange scheme students who will not obtain a degree or other qualification of the University) **are allowed to use a language translation dictionary** if they have a letter from the relevant School confirming their visiting student status.'

<http://www.tlso.manchester.ac.uk/map/teachinglearningassessment/assessment/sectiond-theprocessofassessment/useofdictionariesinexaminations/>

Queen's University Belfast

'1.4.41 International students attending Queen's for one year or less as ERASMUS or Credit- Earning Non-Graduating (CENG) students **will be permitted** to take unmarked language dictionaries into the examination halls.'

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/media/Media,457303,en.pdf>