

French academia in war of words over plan to teach in English - theguardian.com,

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Socialist ministers accused of sabotaging French language by relaxing ban on English being used in French universities



The French government argues that universities like the Sorbonne in Paris (above) need to compete internationally. Photograph: Sipa Press/Rex Features

Jacques Chirac once stormed out of an EU summit because a French business leader was speaking it, Nicolas Sarkozy lamented his lack of it and François Hollande makes small talk in it but is conscious of his accent.

The global spread of the English language has long been a sore point in Paris politics. Now a new battleground has appeared in the linguistic war as the Socialist government wants to allow English to be used as a teaching language in French universities, sparking a rift in academia.

Until now, teaching and lecturing in a foreign language at French universities has been banned by law, except in the case of language courses or visiting professors. The 1994 law was intended to preserve the French language. But in reality, a number of French universities, including some of the most prestigious, have disregarded the legislation and have been steadily using English in lectures and seminars, for example in Masters courses on subjects such as the sciences, technology, economics or business where a kind of "global English" has become the norm.

The government has now decided the ban should be relaxed. In a new higher education law to be debated this month, ministers plan to allow French universities to use foreign languages for teaching, ensuring professors can lecture in English rather than French, if they are teaching a European programme or in partnership with a foreign institution.

But a row has ensued as a number of academics have vented their rage. The Académie Française, guardian of the French language, appealed to French MPs to oppose the plan, claiming the new law "favours a marginalisation of the French language". Academics opposed to the plan have launched a petition, with Claude Hagège, a professor at the Collège de France, warning in the newspaper Le Monde of "an act of sabotage" of the French language.

This week, a collective of senior French academics, including two Nobel prize-winners, hit back in an open-letter to Le Monde, saying that it made sense to allow foreign-language teaching in French faculties and would make its universities more attractive abroad.

The group said hundreds of masters courses in France already featured teaching in English, criticising opponents as "totally out of step" with reality. They said English was used in science and by scientific publications and postgraduate students needed to be able to master it.

The government has refused to back down, arguing that French universities need to win foreign students and compete internationally. France has slipped to fifth place, behind the US, UK, Australia and Germany, for attracting foreign students.

Geneviève Fioraso, the minister for higher education who ruffled feathers by telling the newspaper Liberation that without opening up to foreign languages, French higher education risked becoming five people "sitting round a table discussing Proust", insisted on the need to make French universities more attractive.

But she has written to the Académie Française in an attempt to calm the storm, stressing that only 1% of courses would be affected and that foreign students would still have to learn French.