

Newsletter for November 2013

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Association Proposes Communication as Theme of NGO Conference

As topic for the 2014 Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations affiliated with the UN Department of Public Information, the Universal Esperanto Association has proposed “**The NGO Community in Communication with the World.**”

In a letter to the NGO/DPI Executive Committee, the Association’s UN representative, Dr. Humphrey Tonkin referred to the extreme importance of effective communication in carrying out the eighth of the eight Millennium Development Goals, which calls for the creation of a global partnership for development. Indeed, the creation of this partnership underlies the achievement of all seven of the other MDGs. All too often “the cacophony of voices” among the NGOs creates “not communication but noise,” yet the NGOs have “a huge multiplier effect on the work of the UN” when effectively harnessed to spread the UN’s message and carry out its goals.

Dr. Tonkin put particular stress on the importance of two-way communication between those planning the programmes of the United Nations and those for whom those programmes are designed: “The NGOs, particularly, serve as a way of assisting the ordinary people who are affected by the UN’s efforts to voice their concerns. They serve as a counterbalance to the top-down efforts of governments. Giving these silent masses a voice is a vitally important part of the process needed for effective and sustainable development.”

The Association’s letter quotes Secretary-General Ban’s comments in a recent interview in the UK’s Guardian newspaper regarding a new agenda for the UN following the completion of the period of the MDGs in 2015: “It must be bold in ambition yet simple in design, supported by a new partnership for development. It must be universal in nature yet responsive to the complexities, needs and capacities of individual countries.”

Symposium Addresses English-Medium Instruction in Non-English-Speaking Universities

The spread of English as a language of instruction in countries across the world was the topic of this year’s Nitobe Symposium, held in Reykjavik, Iceland, July 18-20, 2013, immediately before the Universal Esperanto Association’s World Esperanto Congress. Several Esperanto-speaking scholars took the opportunity of attending the symposium before moving on to the Esperanto event.

Recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of courses and programs, particularly at the master’s level, taught entirely or partially in English – a response to the increasing international mobility of students and the growing interest of universities in international rankings, which pit universities of many types across the world in competition for resources, particularly research funding, and national and international prestige.

The symposium, hosted by the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, brought together an invited group of 40 higher education experts from a diverse group of 23 countries, ranging from the United States, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, to China, Japan, Chile, Mexico, Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and India. The Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland) were particularly strongly represented. A forthcoming volume, *English in Nordic Universities: Ideology and Practice*, edited by Anna Kristina Hultgren, Frans Gregersen, and Jacob Thøgersen, to be published by John Benjamins, Amsterdam, in its series *Studies in World Language Problems*, was the immediate inspiration for the symposium.

Keynote addresses were given by Rainer Enrique Hamel (Mexico), Michele Gazzola (Germany/Italy), and F. Xavier Vila (Catalonia, Spain).

“While the use of a single language in higher education obviously benefits the international flow of information, it privileges certain people and disadvantages others, and it is often driven not so much by academic excellence as by academic prestige,” commented one of the organizers of the symposium. “It also erodes the ability of national and local scientific cultures to relate to their local populations, including young people,” he added. There is an urgent need to find other, multilingual solutions, he suggested.

The symposium, held at the Icelandic National Museum, was funded by the USA-based Esperantic Studies Foundation, with additional support from John Benjamins Publishers. The symposium took place under the auspices of the Árni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies, the Icelandic Language Council, and the Vigdis Finnbogadóttir Institute for Foreign Languages. Ari Páll Kristinsson, of the Árni Magnusson Institute, handled local organization.

The Nitobe Seminars are named for Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933), a Japanese diplomat of the 1920s who pioneered the search for international linguistic understanding.

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