

Promoting Multilingualism Through Cooperation: The Arqus Alliance Approach

Next up in our series of articles about alliance cooperation is an article on the [Arqus Alliance](#), and in particular the topic of multilingualism and language learning within an alliance. This is a topic that is not completely new in the Hub, as we arranged a [webinar](#) on digital language learning on the European Day of Languages. All articles in the series can be found [in this folder](#).

Irmgard Wanner, deputy director of the Language Center at Leipzig University, Kerstin Gackle, co-coordinator for Arqus Working Group 11 [Arqus Plurilingual and Intercultural Hub](#), and Meike Münster, the Arqus Café Facilitator, all work for [Leipzig University](#), one of nine universities in the Arqus Alliance. An important part of their working group is an initiative for promoting multilingualism: the [Arqus Cafés](#). In this article, we discuss language learning with the three of them.

Language cafés: a flexible format for language learning

The Arqus Cafés are informal sessions where students and staff can gather, either online or in person, to engage in language practice guided by native and near-native speaking tutors of the respective languages. With both digital and in-person formats, the cafés offer participants a relaxed environment to develop their language skills and broaden cultural understanding without the pressures normally found in teacher-led classroom lessons.

As the facilitator of the Arqus Cafés, Meike coordinates the tutors and participants, manages scheduling and ensures that things are running smoothly. Meike explains, "This is a very successful part of the work package. In the last edition alone, the cafés were visited more than 1200 times from participants across the Arqus Alliance." The format is structured, but also very flexible – each session is led by a fluent speaker of the respective language who *guides the conversation* rather than *teaches*, creating an environment where **learners** can learn through informal dialogue.

One of the surprising aspects of the programme is the popularity of lesser-studied languages. "We are happy to be able to offer a wide variety, including less commonly taught languages," says Meike, pointing to Lithuanian, which gathers a dedicated group of students. In these sessions, led by [Vilnius University](#), students have even begun reading books in the language, starting from simpler texts but then moving on to more challenging ones. There was even a surprisingly high interest in Irish, which took place on-site at Leipzig University. However, German, English, French and Spanish are also highly popular, which shows broad interest for the most commonly taught languages as well.

Supporting a collaborative environment

Irmgard notes that the cafés began in the spring of 2020 as a digital initiative (this was during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic) and quickly grew in popularity among the Alliance's member universities. "The pandemic gave us an opportunity to connect our students across campuses," she recalls, explaining that the online cafés allowed students from the universities to come together. Today, the cafés remain one of Arqus's most successful activities and provide participants with both cultural exchange and a chance to connect on a personal level.

Irmgard and her colleagues all stress the fact that the cafés are about *more than language acquisition*; they are also about building community. "Some students find that even a basic understanding of a language makes them feel more connected to others. These cafés go beyond academic learning; they provide a meaningful social experience." This welcoming environment allows participants to step outside their academic routines, talk freely and meet up with peers.

Encouraging multilingualism alongside the trend towards English

The cafés come at a time when English is increasingly dominant in academic settings. Kerstin explains, "The number of English degree programmes in Leipzig has doubled from about 20 to 40, making it easy for students to come from abroad, earn a degree and leave without learning German. However, students who engage in learning other languages, including but not limited to German, often feel more connected and may even choose to stay in the country after graduating." The Alliance plans to expand these efforts through a Multilingualism Module – which is currently being piloted at Vilnius University – that encourages students to take language courses and focuses on language learning strategies alongside participating in the cafés. The module will offer credit points for language learning, which further emphasises Arqus's commitment to fostering linguistic diversity.

For Irmgard, the push towards English in education is understandable but often short-sighted. She explains, "English is essential in many academic contexts, but it's not enough. For citizens of Europe (and the World), an awareness of multilingualism and multiculturalism is vital for democratic society and social cohesion. By learning other languages, students become aware of the increasingly diverse society they live and work in and become more informed citizens."

Looking ahead

The future of the Arqus Language Cafés includes a greater emphasis on in-person cafés. While the online cafés have provided valuable connections across countries, Meike and her colleagues are eager to establish in-person cafés at more of the Arqus Universities in order to allow students to experience the added dimension that physical presence brings. Additionally, they aim to add

more cafés that are offered for different language levels as well as cafés with specialized topics.

The cafés have become a central element of the Arqus Alliance that unites both students and staff. While the students are clearly the majority, many of the groups also include staff members, which is a very positive trend. Irmgard highlights again the broader sense of the initiative: "In using the language, participants experience the richness of each language and culture. Whether online or in person, this is a very important part of the work in our Alliance." And indeed, one of Arqus's main strategic goals is to "enhance the education of critically engaged European and global citizens who are able and willing to contribute to a multicultural, multilingual and inclusive Europe which is open to the world". The Arqus Café is one of the largest activities in the Alliance and each person who takes part is taking a step to increasing this multicultural, multilingual and inclusive Europe.