

November 3rd 2011

In its October 12th edition, The Fulcrum, The University of Ottawa's English student newspaper, published an opinion letter entitled "Can I get a side of English, please?" The author, Jaclyn Lytle, complained that the University's policy on bilingualism was greatly flawed and took issue with the University's "bilingual agenda" and the lack of effort put into ensuring a strong English presence on the Campus. Her position stemmed from her inability to understand the menu sign at the Quizno's in the cafeteria because it was only written in French. Macleans OnCampus and SunTV's Byline later picked up the story.

Francophones on campus and Ms Lytle share a common goal: to hold the administration of the University of Ottawa accountable for its own bilingualism policy, imperfect as it may be. They may share the same complaints; however, the shortfalls of French services and communications are far more severe than the occasional lapse in English-language signage.

This article is neither a passionate rebuttal to Ms Lytle's article, nor an inflammatory call to arms for the francophone community on campus. It is an informative and pragmatic reminder of the linguistic realities facing students studying at the University of Ottawa.

Every year, the Standing Committee on Francophone Affairs and Official Languages ("Standing Committee") releases an Annual Report, in which it describes the status of bilingualism at the University. Between May 2010 and April 2011, it received 178 complaints, almost all of them critiquing the status of the French language on campus.

We believe that Ms Lytle's complaint has merit, and should be taken seriously. However, her issue also brings to light the significant difference between the quantity and nature of language-related complaints brought forward. While Anglophones may complain about their inability to order a sandwich in their mother tongue, Francophones must face services offered only in English by the University or by hired third-parties, English-only computer software required for courses, nonexistent or poorly written French documents, and even vandalism defacing French language signs on campus.¹

The respect of both official languages must be considered when discussing the University's lack of accountability towards its bilingualism policy. However, as

¹ *Annual Report* of the Standing Committee on Francophone Affairs and Official Languages, 2010-2011, *supra* note 764, p 10.

highlighted in the Standing Committee's Annual Report, we must not lose sight of the fact that the lack of compliance with the bilingualism policy has primarily impacted the University's Francophone students.

The inequality between French and English is also evident in other ways at the University of Ottawa. The University of Ottawa is notorious for its unequal offering of courses in French and English. According to the University's statistics, in 2010-2011, there were 2879 courses offered in English, 1880 offered in French, and 582 that were bilingual². These numbers help us understand the linguistic realities at the University of Ottawa. Consequently, Francophone students are forcibly obligated to attend English courses, even though the University of Ottawa, originally a French-only establishment, is "Canada's University".

In light of the facts presented in this article, we suggest that Ms Lytle is misguided in asserting that English is not afforded the same level of presence on campus. While we are sympathetic to her frustration, however a closer examination of the linguistic realities at the University of Ottawa reveal that we must continue working towards assuring that French is not further marginalised at the University of Ottawa.

It is clear that the shortcomings of the University's bilingualism policy are far more significant for Francophones. Fundamental issues such as access to French-language courses and key services in French are regularly brought up in complaints. However, it is interesting to see that it has taken a complaint from an Anglophone about French-only communication in the cafeteria to create such a widespread debate concerning the lack of accountability towards the University of Ottawa's bilingualism policy.

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² <http://www.uottawa.ca/services/irp/eng/fact-figures/fact/students.html>