

# The struggle between Estonian and English in higher education in Estonia

## Introduction

This paper examines the position of Estonian as a language of instruction in higher education and also tries to find connections between the social prestige of Estonian and the development of Estonian as the language of instruction in academia.

The main research question to be answered is how Estonian higher education tries to find a balance between offering an internationally attractive study and work environment using English as the medium of instruction and the sustainability and development of Estonian. The three most important players in maintaining and developing Estonian language in higher education are the state, the university, and users of Estonian in academia. This article examines the role of all three in the development and practice of language policy in higher education, paying particular attention to the management and activities of the state and universities.

In recent years, the question of the language of instruction in higher education has been an important topic in Estonia as well as in Europe as a whole. The language policy of Estonian higher education, i.e., the struggle between English and Estonian, has also been analysed in comparison with Latvian and Swedish higher education and internationalization. Recent research includes for example articles by Josep Soler-Carbonell, Kerttu Rozenvalde (Kibbermann), and Virve-Anneli Vihman (Soler & Rozenvalde 2021, Soler 2019, Rozenvalde (Kibbermann) 2019, Soler & Vihman 2018). This paper also builds on the authors' previous research on the topic of the language of higher education in the framework of language sustainability (Klaas-Lang 2014a, Klaas-Lang 2014b, Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2015, Klaas-Lang 2016, Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2018, Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2020, Klaas-Lang 2021).

This paper provides an overview of the history of Estonian as the language of instruction in higher education on the example of the University of Tartu – the oldest university in Estonia. Outlining the current situation of language policy in higher education in Estonia, the article provides background for analysing the trends in the state's positions concerning Estonian and English use in instruction over the past fifteen years and for placing those trends (in terms of finding a balance between the local language and English) in the context of measures and activities of Estonian universities, and also in the broader international context of language policy in higher education.

The present paper relies on various documents, reports, and media discourse on this topic, but also personal experience as a university professor and researcher and member of various language policy expert councils.

## The situation of Estonian language and languages in Estonia

There are often said to be more than 7,000 languages in the world.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, 40% of them are on the verge of extinction, having less than 1,000 speakers. Oftentimes Estonians will, showing some embarrassment, call their native language a small language. This classification, however, is not accurate. The Estonian language, with its one million first language speakers, is among the 300 languages with the largest number of speakers in the world.<sup>2</sup> Estonian is not an endangered language but rather a language that is currently vigorous and developing. Estonian is also very visible in the online world: as of 2019, Estonian, the native language of only ~0.0125% of the global population, is the language of 0.1% of Internet websites, making it the 39<sup>th</sup> most widely used language on the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

The future of a language, i.e., its sustainability, depends on many factors. The most important of these, which have also been outlined in different studies (c.f. Ehala et al 2014, UNESCO 2003), are: 1) total number of speakers and size of the contiguous speaker community; 2) inter-

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages](http://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages)

<sup>2</sup> [rosettaproject.org/projects/300-languages/languages](http://rosettaproject.org/projects/300-languages/languages)

<sup>3</sup> [w3techs.com/technologies/history\\_overview/content\\_language/ms/y](http://w3techs.com/technologies/history_overview/content_language/ms/y)

generational transfer, i.e., whether parents transfer their language to their children; 3) the state of development of the language in order to meet the needs of all users and domains of use; 4) legal space to ensure the status and possibility to use the language; 5) reputation of the language and users' attitudes, i.e., whether the speakers value their language; 6) language of education, i.e., whether the language is used in all levels of education from preschool to doctoral studies; 7) coverage of the domains of use, i.e., whether the language is used in all domains from everyday communication to research; 8) IT support and use in technological applications.

Viewing Estonian through the lens of these criteria, there does not seem to be much reason to worry, see also Lukk et al. 2017. One million first-language speakers (approximately 150,000 of whom live abroad) is a resource that should guarantee the survival of Estonian for a long time. In addition to first-language speakers, Estonian is also spoken as a second language (by residents of Estonia having a different first language) and as a foreign language. For example, about a thousand students annually learn Estonian in almost forty universities all over the world, partly with the support of the Estonian state.<sup>4</sup>

The percentage of L1 Estonian speakers has stayed more or less the same during the past couple of decades in Estonia, remaining in the vicinity of 67–68%. However, if we take a closer look we find areas where Estonian speakers are clearly a minority: in North-eastern Estonia only 15% of residents are L1 speakers of Estonian; some districts of Tallinn and small towns in Harjumaa (the county to which Tallinn belongs) are also overwhelmingly Russian-speaking.<sup>5</sup> Re-introducing Estonian to areas where the language environment has become rather non-native (i.e., Russian) is a matter of priority for the Estonian government. For example, a working group has been formed at the Ministry of Education and Research that is tasked with developing a plan for the transition to general education in Estonian.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [haridus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/Dokumendid/EKKAV\\_2018-2027.pdf](http://haridus.archimedes.ee/sites/default/files/Dokumendid/EKKAV_2018-2027.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [www.stat.ee/et/uudised/eesti-elanikud-raagivad-231-eri-emakeelt](http://www.stat.ee/et/uudised/eesti-elanikud-raagivad-231-eri-emakeelt)

<sup>6</sup> [news.err.ee/1608183802/](http://news.err.ee/1608183802/)

Among other languages in Estonia, Russian has the largest number of speakers, but the language environment has become very multilingual over the past few decades. Census data show this clearly: while in 2000 there were 109 languages spoken natively in Estonia, in 2011 there were already 157 different languages. As of March 2021, the number of different native languages was as high as 231, yet 68 of these were only represented by one speaker.<sup>7</sup> These numbers show new residents of Estonia, whose smooth integration into the Estonian language and cultural space is extremely important for social cohesion, so that Estonian remains the main language of communication for individuals with different native languages in Estonia – see also an overview of the integration of new immigrants and a model of study paths for Estonian (Praagli & Klaas-Lang 2020).

Sustainability of the Estonian language as an important national goal is anchored in the development plan of the Estonian language 2021–2035, which aims to “ensure the vitality and functioning of Estonian as the primary language in every domain, ensure that everyone has the right and opportunity to use Estonian, to preserve and strengthen the status and prestige of the Estonian language and the Estonian cultural and information space, and to value knowledge of other languages.”<sup>8</sup> This vision primarily covers the state’s obligations in order to ensure the survival and development of Estonian, but the sustainability of a language is equally dependent on the attitudes and motivation of each speaker to use that language. The responsibility for the development and survival of Estonian does not fall solely on the state and on linguists, but clearly also on all users of Estonian – if nothing else, then at the minimum through choosing computer software in Estonian instead of English.

Legislation protects Estonian as an official language of Estonia and as one of the official languages of the European Union. However, in a modern society characterized both by global information exchange and migration, even the official status along with the supporting infrastructure may not guarantee a language has a future, since the use of English

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<sup>7</sup> [www.stat.ee/et/uudised/eesti-elanikud-raagivad-231-eri-emakeelt](http://www.stat.ee/et/uudised/eesti-elanikud-raagivad-231-eri-emakeelt)

<sup>8</sup> [www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/eesti\\_keelee\\_arengukava\\_2021-2035\\_29.10.2020\\_riigikogusse.pdf](http://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/eesti_keelee_arengukava_2021-2035_29.10.2020_riigikogusse.pdf)

has increased exponentially in education and commerce (Vertovec 2007, 2010).

Language sustainability is clearly connected to the language use in all possible domains. Research-based language programmes and strategies have been developed for Estonian, as they have for other languages in other countries, to ensure the continuation of the official language's functions in all domains, c.f. the Finnish language programme (Hakulinen et al. 2009).

While outlining the factors for language sustainability, it is important to emphasize that the language of higher education is one of the most essential indicators of language sustainability (Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2018, Klaas-Lang 2016, Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2015). If English replaces native languages in their previous roles in one domain (higher education and research), it can result in the loss of a neighbouring domain (e.g., general education) and later also other domains. The study of the state of Estonian language, compiled in 2017, states, based on interviews with experts, that language use in higher education and research is often the most fragile and vulnerable domain “since it influences both the students’ communication skills and the functionality of Estonian in every domain. Language use in higher education is therefore one of the essential indicators and influencing factors of language vitality” (Lukk et al. 2017: 45).

## Estonian as a language of higher education – a view into history

The age of higher education in Europe begins with the founding of the University of Bologna in 1088. The era of Estonian as a medium of instruction in higher education and research is barely a hundred years old. It began in 1919 when the University of Tartu became, at least *de jure*, a university with Estonian as its language of instruction in the newly independent Republic of Estonia.

Estonian appeared as a subject at the university much earlier. Friedrich David Lenz started his first lectures introducing Estonian to students with other native languages already in 1803, immediately after the university was reopened when the Emperor of Russia, Alexander I,

signed an order to establish a lectorate of Estonian and Finnish at the *Kaiserliche Universität zu Dorpat*. The lectorate addressed the demand from students, future priests, whose tasks included communication with local Estonian-speaking people. Thus, Estonian first became a subject taught at the University of Tartu as a foreign language. The students' interest to learn Estonian was based on a pragmatic need. At the same time, however, this interest in Estonian language and culture should be placed in the context of European 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment, which encouraged the study of ethnic languages and cultures. In that discourse, the study of Estonian language and culture was inspired by scientific and generally humanist interest in folklore and culture (Niitemaa & Hovi 1991: 309). With rare exceptions, Estonian was not the first language for the learners.

Although the first Estonians were also admitted to the University of Tartu in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they usually became Germanized. According to the Estonian linguist and neologist Johannes Aavik, speaking Estonian in society was still heavily frowned upon in the early 1890s, and it took some more decades for Estonian to become the language of communication for Estonian students and younger intellectuals (Aavik 1914: 12). At the time, the older generation of Estonian intellectuals still did not use Estonian in their discourse and even patriotically inclined Estonians often chose Russian or German as their home language (Visnapuu 1916: 123). The majority of Estonians were quite indifferent towards their native language, and a good command of German and Russian was considered much more important and practical when considering work opportunities. In fact, most Estonians lacked motivation to learn written Estonian: Estonian was not used for official communication and certainly not as a language of research. At the time, the University of Tartu was also a Russian-speaking university where knowledge of Estonian was only required at the faculty of religious studies (Aavik 1914: 10). In the spring of 1916, the rector issued an order that only Russian should be spoken with university officials, some of whom were also Estonians (ÜL 1916: 110).

Estonian as a language of research and higher education, as well as the working language of the university, still had to find its place. At the same time, it became increasingly clear that language had a particular role in uniting and shaping a nation and that a language must function in every domain, including research. To achieve this goal, among other

measures, publication of literature in Estonian was encouraged in Estonia. For example, Villem Ernits, a student at that time who later became a legendary linguist and promoter of the Estonian temperance movement, published an encouragement for all student organizations to buy and read one another's Estonian-language publications in the first issue of the student newspaper *Üliõpilasteleht* in 1914. In the contemporary society, Estonian had the role of a mere colloquial language. People with good command of written Estonian were needed for Estonian to leave this restriction behind. Students, the educated elite, were seen as the force who would learn and use Estonian and thus also promote it among others (Aavik 1914: 13; Visnapuu 1916: 124; see also Pajusalu 2019; Klaas 2003). Much work was still needed to develop Estonian for every conceivable domain, including being a language of science and instruction at university.

On 1 December 1919, the university opened its doors as the national university of the newly established Republic of Estonia, with Estonian as the language of instruction. At first there were not enough lecturers; to alleviate this situation, scientists and lecturers from abroad were invited: Lauri Kettunen, Ilmari Manninen, Aarne Miikael Tallgren, and Arno Rafael Cederberg from Finland; Johannes Gabriel Granö and Sten Karling from Sweden; Walter Anderson and others from Germany<sup>9</sup>. Much of the teaching was still carried out in a foreign language during the national university's first years of operation. However, the professors who had come from abroad managed to learn Estonian quickly and also to teach their courses in Estonian. The need to teach Estonian as a foreign language was recognized as well; a weekly two-hour course was taught by the abovementioned Johannes Aavik for both faculty and students (Vihma 2003: 144). The Estonian-language environment at work and everyday life probably provided additional practice opportunities to the non-native speakers that helped them acquire the language quickly. The value placed on Estonian by native speakers was surely no less important.

Estonians' self-awareness regarding their native language increased as higher education gradually became more Estonian-language

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<sup>9</sup> [www.ut.ee/en/university/general/history](http://www.ut.ee/en/university/general/history)

based. This did not happen overnight but was the result of the combined influence of different factors: the development of Estonian scientific language, non-Estonian professors learning Estonian, the formation of a generation of local intellectuals. Intensive corpus planning increased the quality and status of the language and also changed the users' attitudes towards Estonian. Positive attitudes towards Estonian in turn encouraged further use and development of the language. By the end of the first era of independence in 1940, Estonian had become a fully-fledged language of higher education and research. Command of written Estonian had become an important symbol of education (Pajusalu 2019: 80).

Estonian remained a medium of higher education and research publications also for the duration of the Soviet occupation until 1991 – alongside Russian. For example, at Tartu State University (c.f. Klaas 2003), as the University of Tartu was called during this era, several specialties were taught in parallel both in Estonian and Russian, but Estonian was a required subject for all non-native students for 2–4 hours a week for as long as 1–2 years. However, a great language-related change and limitation of use for Estonian took place during this era: after 1975, dissertations could only be submitted for defence in Russian.

In the early 1990s, after Estonia had regained its independence, the volume of Russian-language higher education was sizable – nearly 17% of students were enrolled in Russian-language study programmes. The first English-language study opportunities in Estonian universities were also created in the 1990s. English-language instruction, however, only barely amounted to 1% in 1992 (Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2015: 168).

The significant role of Russian-medium education in the 1990s was in part due to the carryover of Russian-language student groups from the Soviet period. At the same time, the then-new way of life created opportunities to establish new educational institutions. A number of relatively small universities and institutes of technology sprang up, many of which offered study opportunities specifically to young people with Russian as their native language. However, when quality control procedures (assessments of conformity to quality standards) were introduced for institutions of higher education, many of these private institutions were forced to close (*ibid.*: 167).



## Estonian as a language of higher education – current situation

In the academic year 2020/2021 there were 18 institutions of higher education in Estonia: six public universities and one private one, and seven public and four private institutions of professional higher education, with a total number of 45,259 registered students. Just ten years ago there were approximately 70,000 students in Estonia, i.e., the number of students has decreased significantly in the past years in connection with Estonia's population decrease.

It is possible to study at universities and institutions of higher education either in Estonian, Russian, or English, but the share of Russian-language instruction has become almost non-existent: 13.7% of full-time students study in English, 0.1% in Russian.<sup>10</sup> Estonian is the dominant language of instruction on all levels. According to the Higher Education Act (KHaS 2019: § 3 (3)), “the language of instruction of the study programmes of the first and second level of higher education is Estonian or, by a decision of the higher education institution, a foreign language, provided that it is necessary for ensuring the quality of the studies or the availability of specialists with higher education and the resources required for the studies in the foreign language are available.” The act does not regulate the language of instruction for doctoral studies.

Estonian higher education has become international in every way during the past decade: in terms of students, lecturers, and research fellows as well as English-language study programmes. In the academic year 2019/2020, 5,528 international students were admitted in Estonia (12% of the total number of students). In the 2006/2007 academic year, there were only 901 international students studying in Estonia. The increase has been more than sixfold. Estonia has become a relatively attractive destination for international students, though naturally remaining far behind English-speaking countries. In Finland, for instance, 8% of students were international students in 2019; the OECD average is 6%.<sup>11</sup>

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[www.haridussilm.ee/ee/tasemeharidus/haridusliigid/korgharidus/uliopilased](http://www.haridussilm.ee/ee/tasemeharidus/haridusliigid/korgharidus/uliopilased)

<sup>11</sup> [www.arene.fi/wp-content/uploads/Raportit/2020/Ulkomaalaiset\\_opiskelijat\\_Suomen\\_korkeakouluissa\\_raportti.pdf](http://www.arene.fi/wp-content/uploads/Raportit/2020/Ulkomaalaiset_opiskelijat_Suomen_korkeakouluissa_raportti.pdf)

The success story of internationalization in Estonia's higher education is on the one hand built on national guidelines, and on the other hand on steps taken by universities themselves due to objective circumstances. Estonia has lagged behind other European countries in its higher education language policy. Processes were accelerated through the 2013 higher education reform which made native-language higher education free of tuition and forced universities to increase their income via English-language study programmes. This is why universities have developed numerous English-language study programmes during the past decade. For example, in the 2018/2019 academic year, English-language study programmes amounted to 38% of all study programmes at the master's level. In the most part, English-language study programmes were and still are created based on actual need – to ensure the survival of a study programme developed at the university for decades with care and dedication. When there are not enough Estonian-speaking local students, changing the language of instruction to English and looking for students abroad, even by having Estonian taxpayers covering the cost of their tuition fees (see explanation below), is seen as the only way to preserve the study programme.

The most recent reliable data on the percentage of international students pertains to the academic year 2019/2020, as the 2020/2021 academic year was exceptional due to the COVID-19 pandemic; statistics from this year cannot be considered reliable, and the decrease in the number of international students does not reflect actual trends. However, some universities have stopped admitting international students (e.g., Tallinn University of Technology), and many international students (both full-time and exchange students) have changed their plans to come to Estonia.<sup>12</sup>

## Why are universities offering English-language study programmes?

The above-mentioned Higher Education Act (KHaS 2019) refers to the two most important reasons why an institution of higher education could

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<sup>12</sup> [tartu.postimees.ee/7072457/](http://tartu.postimees.ee/7072457/)

and should offer English-language study programmes. These are 1) the need to guarantee the quality of the programmes, and 2) the availability of specialists with higher education in Estonia. Foreign-language, i.e., English-language study programmes are accredited by the Ministry of Education and Science and of course the institutions of higher education must justify their need to launch an English-language study programme instead of an Estonian-language one. Next, this paper will analyse the arguments presented in justification of the needs for starting English-language study programmes. The arguments are doubtless legitimate, at least in part, but there is still much room for interpretation.

### **1. There are not enough students for all existing study programmes.**

Regarding total student numbers, compared to the most successful years, we currently see a great decrease. While in 2012 there were approximately 67,000 students in Estonia, now that number stands at 46,000. In comparison, in 2012 there were 18,000 students enrolled at the University of Tartu, now there are 13,000. In the past eleven years the number of institutions of higher education has decreased from 39 to 18. The number of study programmes has also decreased but is still around 700.<sup>13</sup> Despite the significant decrease in the number of institutions of higher education, the number of study programmes has not decreased substantially in recent years. It might thus be assumed that perhaps there are too many study programmes at Estonian universities and that therefore there are not enough students for all programmes or for similar programmes.

### **2. The Estonian labour market needs specialists and by using English-language study programmes we are training them.**

Theoretically, this could of course be true. In reality, one only has to look into these study programmes to see how small or even entirely non-existent the position of the Estonian language and knowledge of Estonia is in them. The universities' main argument for starting an English-language study programme is precisely the need to train specialists for the Estonian labour market in a situation where there are simply not enough local students. However, according to the National Audit Office

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<sup>13</sup> [www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/6\\_korghar\\_progr\\_2020-23\\_seletuskiri\\_dets19.docx.pdf](http://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/6_korghar_progr_2020-23_seletuskiri_dets19.docx.pdf)

report (2015), an average of 20.7% of international students remain in Estonia. Many more international students would like to stay: according to the University of Tartu international students' survey (2017), 41% of respondents would like to remain in Estonia after graduating, and 8% would like to continue their studies here. A survey conducted by Tallinn University of Technology (2019) showed that over 80% of graduated international students want to associate themselves with Estonia in the future. The data originates from the overview "*Välisüliõpilaste õppimine ja õpetamine Eesti kõrgkoolides*" ('Studying by and teaching of international students in Estonian institutions of higher education') issued by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA 2019).

English-language study programmes impart knowledge of the respective specialties but do not, as a rule (with the exception of the private higher education institution Mainor<sup>14</sup>), teach the Estonian language or how to manage in Estonian society and the Estonian business environment. Estonian courses in the study programmes are optional at best; international graduates will not find work in Estonia. The international students' overview mentioned above clearly states (EKKA 2019: 15): "The greatest problem that international students face when applying for apprenticeship or work is the lack of knowledge of Estonian. Even in international enterprises, the working language is often Estonian." Furthermore, employers point out that "international students also lack understanding of the Estonian business environment and coaching apprentices in this is too resource-intensive." (ibid.). Therefore, if employers and the government have the desire and willingness to employ international students studying in Estonia and keep them in the country, closer cooperation with institutions of higher education is needed to overcome that obstacle.

### **3. Government funding of higher education does not cover all costs and charging tuition in English-language study programmes helps decrease the lack of funding.**

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<sup>14</sup> [www.euas.eu](http://www.euas.eu)

Lack of government funding for institutions of higher education has been pointed out before and is a constant point of discussion in Estonia.<sup>15</sup> Since studying in Estonian has been free of charge since 2013, English-language teaching is the only opportunity left for universities to charge tuition. But do all international students pay for their studies or does the Estonian taxpayer? Universities have different approaches here. For example, at the University of Tartu half of international students pay tuition by now, thereby at least in part compensating the university's expenses, but just a few years ago the proportion of tuition-paying students was about one third. Another question is whether a tuition fee of about 400 euros per month<sup>16</sup> is enough to cover the actual costs. But even this amount helps.

#### **4. Internationalization both among students and faculty is a quality metric for universities.**

This argument is based on the claim that high-quality education brings international students as well as foreign research fellows and professors to our universities. They in turn contribute to an increase in the quality of teaching on an international level. However, drawing such a one-to-one relation between high-quality teaching and research on the one hand and international higher education on the other raises questions of its own. Is Estonian-language instruction of lower quality and a local professor worse than a foreign one?

### **The government guiding language policy at universities – the dynamics of the past 15 years**

Estonian is an official language whose status is guaranteed by both the Estonian Constitution and the Language Act. According to §37 of the Constitution, the state must guarantee everyone's right to be taught in Estonian (Constitution 2015). The Higher Education Act also states that Estonian is to be the language of instruction in universities in Estonia, but it also gives the decision-making body of the university the authority to

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<sup>15</sup> [news.err.ee/994875/](http://news.err.ee/994875/)

<sup>16</sup> Tuition fees for foreign-language master's programmes in humanities: [sotsiaalteadused.ut.ee/et/sisu/voorkeelsed-oppekavad](http://sotsiaalteadused.ut.ee/et/sisu/voorkeelsed-oppekavad)

choose another language of instruction for a study programme (KHAS 2019).

In the previous fifteen years, the Estonian government has made great changes in its approaches to the internationalization of universities and in defining of the roles of Estonian and English.

Here one can draw parallels with trends in European higher education language policy. A similar evolution has occurred here; threats to the sustainability of national languages, cultures and native-speaking intellectuals due to the internationalization of higher education have become commonplace, see below. Estonia has undergone the same change in attitudes. However, all development plans of Estonian language from those years (EKAS 2004, EKA 2011, EKA 2021) emphasized the need to retain and develop Estonian-language higher education. The language development plans have encouraged a balance between Estonian-language and English-language higher education in order to prevent any specialty from becoming completely foreign-language based. In the visions for higher education and related domains, different trends have dominated at different times: there are stages where more emphasis is placed on the international visibility of higher education (bolstered by English-language studies) and the sustainability of Estonian is given lower priority, while at other times an attempt is made to strike a balance between Estonian and English so as not to damage the positions of the Estonian language in higher education.

At the beginning of the above-mentioned period (the last 15 years), international learning environment and Estonian-language higher education were both equally supported in development plans. Thus, for example, the “Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015” (EKS 2006) listed as one of its goals the “ensuring the development of Estonian-language educational and cultural space. Ensuring the continuation and development of Estonian-medium higher education in the European open education space. It is the goal that higher education can be received in all fields of study on all levels of education.” The “Estonian Higher Education Internationalizations Strategy 2006–2015” (EKRS 2006) did indeed emphasize the importance of internationalization and therefore also the need for developing English-language study programmes. On the other hand, the strategy stressed the important function of universities in

relation to developing the official language and clearly defined the role of Estonian as language of instruction: “While opening Estonian higher education and introducing an international dimension to each study programme, we must ensure the preservation of Estonian as the primary language of instruction and science in institutions of higher education.” (EKRS 2006)

In the middle of this period the government issued a guideline to offer as much English-language instruction as possible at universities and to acquire as many international students and faculty as possible. Internationalization and use of foreign languages in higher education institutions were seen as a guarantee of academic success and quality. The most important guidelines for Estonian higher education during that period were “Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020” (EÕS 2020) and an application plan based on its guidelines and visions “Higher Education Programme 2016–2019” (KHP 2016). The Lifelong Learning Strategy touches on the education opportunities for young people with native languages other than Estonian and ensures opportunities to learn Estonian for representatives of all age groups. However, maintaining and developing Estonian-language higher education – an important domain for the sustainability of language – has not been formulated as a goal.

It is true that during all these years the government has, with the help of various programmes, funded the development of Estonian terminology as well as writing and publishing of academic textbooks in Estonian and provided money for the study of Estonian and the development of language technology<sup>17</sup>. However, the universities’ success metric has still been international English-language instruction; universities have received special funding to develop English-language curricula. It is therefore understandable that the university in turn encourages and motivates its departments to provide more such instruction.

Nevertheless, recent years in particular have brought about an important change in national guidelines. At the 2019 Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) elections the party programmes paid much more attention to language issues compared to previous years<sup>18</sup>. Two issues could be distinguished: language of instruction at general education schools and lan-

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<sup>17</sup> [www.hm.ee/et/tegevused/eesti-keel-ja-voorkeeled/programmide](http://www.hm.ee/et/tegevused/eesti-keel-ja-voorkeeled/programmide)

<sup>18</sup> For more information see [arvamus.postimees.ee/6520040](http://arvamus.postimees.ee/6520040)

guage of instruction at universities. In general, the parties were quite careful with regard to the requirement to maintain Estonian-language instruction in higher education, admitting that Estonian-language higher education and development of an Estonian scientific language are important for Estonia but emphasizing primarily digital solutions and terminology development.

The parties concentrating more on strengthening the Estonian language's position in higher education in their election programmes were the liberal Reform Party, the national-conservative party *Isamaa*, and the Social Democratic Party. In addition to the development of Estonian-language instruction, the Reform Party set as its goal a better integration of international students in Estonia in the future: "The continuation and strengthening of Estonian-language higher education is important to us. We therefore see the need to develop Estonian-language study programmes and include modules for Estonian language, culture, and society in all English-language study programmes." *Isamaa* points to the need to maintain Estonian as the working language at higher education institutions and finds it necessary for "international teaching staff coming to Estonia for a long-term stay to learn Estonian." *Isamaa* also connects government funding for universities with Estonian-language instruction: "In funding higher education institutions we prefer Estonian-language study programmes by issuing a state-commissioned education request for higher education institutions in order to finance these while limiting cross-subsidizing and grants for foreign-language study programmes." The Social Democratic Party's programme asserts that "free of charge Estonian-language instruction must be provided by all Estonian public institutions of higher education for all study programmes."

The parties' positions on language policy indicate that Estonian society has understood the immense importance of the sustainability of Estonian-language higher education for the Estonian national spirit and culture. Development plans for the Estonian language, both the current one and all previous ones, have emphasized this. It is nevertheless essential that the new "Education Sector Development Plan 2021–2035" (HA 2021) also bestows consideration upon the fragility of Estonian-language higher education. The Education Sector Development Plan clearly outlines the problem that the percentage of English-language instruction in



higher education has rapidly increased while that of the Estonian-language instruction has decreased. Measures for solving this problem include maintaining and developing Estonian-language higher education study programmes, including the creation and application of terminology. This alone does not, however, suffice. The plan also pays specific attention to teaching Estonian to both international students and academic faculty “so that highly skilled international students and graduates would stay in Estonia permanently”. It is quite significant that the state’s guidelines to universities include the acquisition of a minimum of an intermediate level of Estonian proficiency for international students for their entrance into the labour market (HA 2021).

The new “Higher Education Programme 2019–2023” (KHP 2019) also includes guidelines to intensify international students’ study of the Estonian language, specifically to satisfy the needs of the labour market: “When developing international study programmes, emphasis should be placed, among other things, on what the added value of foreign-language instruction is, i.e., on what opportunities each graduate has to enter the Estonian labour market. Special attention should be paid to increasing the amount of Estonian-language studies in study programmes aimed at international students.” While up to now universities received additional funding for developing English-language study programmes, now they are pressured by the Ministry of Education and Science to include at least 6 ECTS worth of Estonian-language studies in English-language curricula.

A critical time regarding the “generational transfer” of Estonian in higher education institutions will already come in ten to twenty years, since 20% of academic staff is currently aged 60 years or older. Tomorrow’s academic staff will be made up by today’s doctoral students. In her article “The crisis of Estonian-language academic labour market”, published in the culture-oriented newspaper *Sirp* on 29 January 2021, Eneli Kindsiko points out the following fact: while in 2015 16% of the new students admitted to University of Tartu doctoral studies were international students, by 2020 the percentage of international students had grown to 37%.<sup>19</sup> Members of the new Estonian-speaking generation of academics could also include young researchers who finished their doctoral studies

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<sup>19</sup> [www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/eestikeelse-akadeemilise-tooturu-kriis/](http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/eestikeelse-akadeemilise-tooturu-kriis/)

abroad if Estonian universities can offer them an inspiring and motivating working environment. Apparently, though, an academic career is generally not sufficiently attractive for the Estonian youth to set out on the long and underfunded path of doctoral studies.

## Language policy of higher education in Europe – trends of recent years

The changes in national guidelines second the trends present in European higher education language policy in recent years.

Scandinavian countries as well as the Netherlands have always been presented as the success stories of internationalization. Indeed, these countries stand out in Europe for their international students, English-language instruction, and international staff. However, it is highly significant that especially in recent years attitudes have started to emerge, even at the government level, that recommend putting the brakes on the increase of the number of international students and the spread of English in universities. Emphasis is also put on the need to prepare international students better for the local labour market. Thus, in 2018 the government of Denmark proposed to decrease the number of international students at universities and pay more attention to preparing international students based on the needs of Denmark's labour market (Nissen 2019: 228). The latter is related to teaching students the Danish language and the functioning of Danish society.

Nordic countries have tried to find a way for higher education institutions to avoid the massive onslaught of English both in studies and as the working language of the organization. In 2018, Nordic language political recommendations for universities (Nordic Countries 2018) were completed, and even the title of the volume includes a recommendation – *More parallel, please!* The main topics covered by the recommendations are studies, publication of research results, universities' academic and administrative staff's knowledge of the local language and English, international students' learning of the local language, and internal and external communication. Since these are recommendations and not laws set in stone, the authors refer to the need to negotiate the principles for the functioning of the languages on both the state and university level. The

recommendations do not question the status of English as the *lingua franca* of modern academia and admit that, in addition to local languages, English has become the main language of instruction and work in all Nordic countries also in higher education. As in Estonia, it is not possible nowadays in the Nordic countries to have an academic career without a good command of English. However, the question is how to promote multilingualism and attitudes that place value on local languages in addition to, but not instead of, English at universities.

### **Attitudes – is maintaining Estonian in higher education valuable? The language user’s viewpoint**

In the Estonian language situation survey (Lukk et al. 2017: 48) it was mentioned that beside national measures, the development of attitudes and feelings of personal responsibility play an even more important role in maintaining Estonian as a language of higher education. Researchers’ personal responsibility is related to the development of terminology and popularization activities in their fields, the responsibility of administrators is related to the criteria they set for funding projects which value (or fail to value) publications in Estonian, a university’s responsibility is related to teaching Estonian and functioning of the society to international students enrolled in English-language study programmes.

A survey of University of Tartu employees’ language attitudes (Keelehoiakud 2018) shows that academic staff have very different attitudes towards the necessity to maintain and develop Estonian in academia. The opinions range from one extreme to the other. There are attitudes that do not see any need for maintaining instruction in Estonian:

“Everything is in English. Why do it in Estonian? Why teach in Estonian at all? It’s a waste of time and resources. Why write textbooks in Estonian, everything is there in English, why waste time and printing paper?”

A slightly more moderate position acknowledges the need to support the existence of Estonian in higher education and research, but for pragmatic reasons even native speakers do not consider it wise to spend their time on publishing their results in Estonian:

“I’m getting paid for an English-language article. So, this is a difficult question, that no one is against giving value to [Estonian], but at the end of the day the time and resources we have still push it down among the priorities.”

The above quotation also conveys the attitude of the university as an institution which tends to guide researchers towards English.

There is also acceptance of the “fate” that the Estonian language’s role in Estonian higher educations will be marginal in the future, but instruction in Estonian could still be provided to some extent:

“Rather, how to politely take a step back, so that Estonian would still remain in some way, and something would be done in Estonian.”

However, there are also some viewpoints that see the personal responsibility of the teacher and researcher in maintaining and developing Estonian-language higher education:

“I don’t quite agree that the university’s attitude should be such that whenever you do something new or reform something the first question is: “Why aren’t you doing it in English?” So, I think that our priority and our mission is to develop Estonian-language higher education.”

The study was conducted in 2018, and scepticism towards the value of Estonian in academia could be related to the trends and attitudes prevalent at the time in Estonian society as a whole, including national policy. In 2022 the University of Tartu plans to study the language attitudes of its employees again. Since maintaining and developing Estonian as a language of higher education and research has been addressed very frequently in society in recent years, it would be interesting to observe whether the attitudes valuing Estonian have also reached the common practice of the academic staff.

## **In conclusion and for further contemplation**

This article presents the roles of the state, the university, and the user of Estonian in academia in maintaining and developing Estonian in higher education.

The role of the state has been established clearly in both the Constitution and the Language Act. The operating grant contracts between the state and the universities should therefore motivate higher education institutions to maintain and develop Estonian-language study programmes in order to prevent any programme from becoming an entirely foreign-language medium. Naturally, maintenance and development of education also mean development of terminology. The study of the Estonian language will have to be supported also in future, in order for research results to be reflected in language technology applications, terminology development, and the writing and publication of higher education textbooks. However, the Estonian-language study programmes are what guarantee that the results of terminology development and new university textbooks will also be used. The state controls the funding contracts for universities and thus also has the means to influence the integration of international students enrolled in English-language study programmes into Estonian society and their knowledge of the Estonian language and society when they start working after graduating. In the visions and development plans that have entered into force recently or will do so in the near future, the state has clearly emphasized both the need to maintain and advance Estonian-language higher education and to develop the Estonian skills of international students and academic staff sufficiently to enable them to integrate into Estonian society.

In order for the national visions to be applied in practice, agreements and synchronized activities are needed throughout the higher education field. Universities as public institutions are of course autonomous, but autonomy also places a responsibility for adhering to the Constitution and the Language Act, for the survival of the Estonian language, intelligentsia, and Estonian intellectual culture on universities. The linguistic and cultural diversity of a university is without doubt extremely valuable, but it must not displace the valuing of Estonian language, culture, and mentality. Shaping attitudes to value the Estonian language and applying these values in practice in their organization is something that universities could and should do in concord with the state.

These activities are related to ensuring Estonian-language instruction in study programmes as well as adding an Estonia-related module in English-language programmes. Study programmes do provide

general skills in addition to specific professional knowledge. One of these general skills for a future specialist working in Estonia is certainly knowledge of Estonian and understanding of Estonian society and culture.

A university aware of its mission should also stand for parallel language use in its organization. Universities employ more and more full time international academic staff. Foreign lecturers and researchers working under permanent contract could and should acquire at least some level of Estonian proficiency during the first term of evaluation, enabling them to participate in Estonian-language meetings and events, i.e., to take part in university life. Provisions must also be made to enable international staff to learn Estonian, including that language studies should be part of the foreign lecturers' job, not a hobby to be engaged in during their time off or in the dark of night. The university should provide instruction and consider language learning an actual work task with time allotted for it.

However, national measures and mission-aware and mission-sensitive actions of the universities will only be applied in practice if the native-speaking lecturers and researchers also perceive a personal responsibility for the survival of Estonian as a language of higher education. The social prestige of the Estonian language increased at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of Estonian-language university education. The positive attitudes of native speakers towards Estonian were also very important in this process. Even now, a hundred years later, the sustainability of the Estonian language as a language of instruction at university depends to a large extent on users' own attitudes. While the significance of Estonian for the state and the people has been established in the most important laws, it can only become a fact of life if those who speak, write, and teach in Estonian also consider it important.

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