



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Language policy and the sustainability of Estonian in higher education

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What this presentation is about?

- Sociolinguistic criteria for the vitality of languages - the case of Estonian.
- National-level regulations and strategic documents with regard to the Estonian language in higher education.
- Higher education and language of tuition in Estonia – past and present.
- The language of dissertations in 2013–2018.
- Preservation and development of mother tongue medium higher education in political debates.

Higher education in Estonia.

Historical overview



- 1632 the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf established in Tartu the first university – *Academia Gustaviana* - LATIN
- 1802 the University of Tartu was re-opened under the name of *Kaiserliche Universität zu Dorpat* - GERMAN
- 1803 Friedrich David Lenz first started his lectures introducing the Estonian language
- 1895 *Imperatorskij Jur'evskij Universitet* – RUSSIAN
- **1 December 1919 the *University of Tartu of the Estonian Republic* – ESTONIAN *de jure***
- 1944-1989 *Tartu Riiklik Ülikool* – ESTONIAN//RUSSIAN
- 1975 - all PhD dissertations presented for defense had to be written in Russian.



Sociolinguistic criteria for the vitality of languages – the case of Estonian

- Estonian has a critical mass of speakers;
- Estonian is used at home, and the Estonians have offspring;
- Estonia enjoys the status of a state language and an official language of the EU;
- Estonian is used in all spheres of life including everyday communication and high culture, business, and science;
- Estonian is used as a medium of instruction on all educational levels from compulsory schools to doctoral studies;
- IT-support is available.

The language of higher education - one of the most important indicators among the factors of language sustainability

*„Language use in higher education and research is often the most fragile and vulnerable area, since it influences students' communication skills as well as the functionality of Estonian in every domain. **Language use in higher education is therefore one of the pivotal parameters and influencing factors of language vitality.**“*

(The Study on the State of the Language in Estonia 2017)

EFNIL (European Federation of National Institutions for Language)

Language Use in University Teaching and Research. Florence, 2015

- *Tendency to use English instead of the standard languages of the various countries in university teaching and research restricts the domains of these languages and their development and thus endangers the linguistic diversity of Europe that is essential for the cultural diversity and wealth of our continent.*



English as a language of instruction does not accompany the national language but frequently replaces it.



The legal space of Estonian language and language policy strategies (1)

The Language Act of the Republic of Estonia 2011 (first 1989):

- the Estonian language is the official language of Estonia;
- the task of the Estonian state is to develop, preserve, and **protect the Estonian language and to ensure the use of the Estonian language as the main language of communication in all spheres of public life.**

The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (2011):

- the state will ensure the preservation of the Estonian nationality, language, and culture through time;
- the Estonian language is the official language of Estonia;
- **the state is obliged to ensure everyone's right to receive Estonian-medium education.**



The legal space of Estonian higher education and the Estonian language (1)

The **Universities Act** (2019) and the **Act for professional higher educational establishments** (2019) provide:

- Estonian language is the medium of instruction on the level of higher education;
- the use of other languages is decided by the council of the respective educational establishment or the Minister of Education and Research.



The legal space of Estonian language and language policy strategies (2)

The principles of "The Development Strategy of the Estonian Language for 2004–2010" and "The Development Plan of the Estonian Language for 2011–2017 (2020)"

- to ensure the continuation of Estonian-medium higher education;
 - to avoid exclusive use of a foreign language in any branch of science;
 - Estonian-medium teaching should be available on all educational levels and in all curriculum groups;
 - major research results should be published also in Estonian.
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- **The Development Strategy of the Estonian Language for 2020-2035**



Strategic documents of the language domain

State-financed programmes:

- Estonian language technology 2018–2027 (previous programmes for 2006–2010, and 2011–2017)
- Support for the development of the Estonian terminology 2018–2027 (previous 2008–2012; 2013–2017);
- Estonian-language textbooks for higher education institutions 2018–2027 (previous 2008–2012; 2013–2017).
- The Estonian language 2019 – 2027; (previous 2009–2013; 2014–2018) – support for research.



The position of Estonian as the language of higher education in national strategies

There is no mention of the role of Estonian as the language of higher education in the "Estonian Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2020" and the "National Programme for Higher Education 2016–2019".

- Rather, **they stress the importance of the internationalisation of HEIs** (=opening of English-medium study programmes) which is seen as a guarantee of academic success and quality.
- Principles that stressed the importance of safeguarding the position of Estonian as the language of higher education have been more or less abandoned.



Languages of tuition in Estonian HE, 1993–2018

Student numbers by language of tuition, 1993–2018:

	1993	2013	2018
Study in Estonian	20 585 =78,15%	5871 = 85,7%	36 941 = 81%
Study in English	176 = 0.85%	2219 = 3.8%	5792 = 13%
Study in Russian	4303 = 21%	3871 = 6.6%	746 = 2%
Bilingual (Estonian /English programmes, PhD)		2299 = 3.9%	2336 = 4%
Total	25,064	64,806	45,815

Distribution of curricula between languages of instruction 2013–2019 (absolute numbers)

Language of the curriculum	2013 /14	2014 /15	2015 /16	2016 /17	2017 /18	2018/19
Estonian and English (Doctoral study)	121	136	142	144	137	69 (10 %)
Estonian and Russian (Doctoral study)	3	3	3	4	4	1
Estonian	666	628	611	599	561	514 (73%)
English	90	94	106	125	115	102 (15%)
Russian	29	30	35	30	21	17 (2%)
Total	909	891	897	902	838	703



Some features of the higher education reform

- New fee-paying English-medium curricula launched since 2013:
 - University of Tartu: medicine, financial mathematics, ...
 - Tallinn University of Technology: e-government technologies, technology of wood and plastic, ...
 - Estonian University of Life Sciences: veterinary medicine,
- Target groups are international students from different countries (incl. Finns who have previously studied in Estonian), but also domestic students.
- **International students make up 11% of total student number.**



Distribution of curricula by language of tuition

- Most English-medium programmes are MA curricula:
2012- 9% of all curricula were English-medium
2014 - 21%
2019 - 38%.
- Most PhD programmes are bilingual – Estonian and English;
- **Trend:**
 - BA programmes are offered mostly in Estonian (with some modules in foreign languages);
 - MA and PhD programmes are increasingly in English.



Motivation for the universities to offer English-medium tuition

- International study environment is a performance indicator considered by international university rankings.
- Opportunity to admit fee-paying students to English-taught programmes.
- International students compensate for the decrease in domestic student numbers.
- Performance agreements (concluded between the MER and universities) provide additional funding for internationalisation.

The language of dissertations in 2013–2018



University	2013 Est	2013 F	2014 Est	2014 F	2015 Est	2015 F	2016 Est	2016 F	2017 Est	2017 F	2018 Est	2018 F
UT	17	99	11	98	12	101	9	110	15	130	19	110
TalTech	0	54	0	57	0	61	0	74	0	62	1	76
EULS	0	14	0	18	0	13	0	20	0	18	0	9
TU	11	12	6	8	7	18	3	16	7	15	4	18
EBS	0	3	1	1	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	3
EAA	1	2	1	1	0	2	2	1	2	1	0	2
EAMT	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	2	4	1	1	1
Total	31	185	21	184	21	199	17	225	28	228	25	219
Percentage	14,4%	85,6%	10,2%	89,8%	9,5%	90,5%	7,0%	93,0%	10,9%	89,1%	10,2%	89,8%



Language of PhD theses and their summaries

- The universities have agreed that a thesis written in a foreign language must include an Estonian-language summary and, *vice-versa*: a thesis written in Estonian has to have a summary in a foreign language.
- Some universities require a longer and exhaustive summary, others require only a short 1–2 page summary.
- Estonian-language theses are more common in the humanities and law.
- Good summaries qualify for the Scholarship of the Estonian-language summary.



Current topics of discussion

- Should EST-medium curricula be opened for fee-paying students?
- Should some ENG-medium curricula be offered free of charge?
- Introduction of obligatory/compulsory Estonian language-culture package for international full-time students + programme of integration into EST society?

14.03.2018 – Discussion of the *Usage of Estonian language in education* in the Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*)

5.-6.11.2018 – Baltic Language Forum *National languages in the Baltic States: past, present and future* in Tallinn

Preservation and development of mother tongue medium higher education in political debates

- In March 2019, Estonia elected the Parliament (*Riigikogu*)
- Does Estonian university mean that the primary language of instruction on the Bachelor's and Master's level is Estonian?
- **The working language of higher education institutions** is also becoming a topic of discussion: to what extent does the state want Estonian universities to work in Estonian.

Coalition Contract 2019

- Generally worded agreement that **the proportion of Estonian-medium higher education must not decrease and it has to be free for the students.**
- Compared to the pre-election positions the education policy of the coalition contract is considerably more moderate and general.
- The first time the ensuring of the sustainability of Estonian in higher education has reached the level of government principles, cf. Coalition Contract 2016 and Coalition Contract 2015.



CONCLUSIONS (1)

1. Significant changes in the sociolinguistic environment of Estonia in the last decades: Russian which used to be the greatest influencing language for Estonian during the Soviet occupation has been replaced by English.
2. Estonian which is the official language of Estonia and one of the official languages of the European Union is still the primary language of higher education in Estonia.
3. The internationalization of research and higher education is mainly mediated by English.
4. Many English-medium curricula lack the subjects of Estonian language and knowledge of Estonian society.



CONCLUSIONS (2)

5. English-medium curricula together with Estonian- and English-medium curricula constituted in 2018/2019 academic year the at 25% of all curricula.
6. MA level 38% of curricula are English-medium.
7. Almost all PhD programs use English beside Estonian.
8. Estonian continues to function as a language of research with the help of national measures.
9. The coalition contract in 2019:
the necessity and the state's duty to ensure the sustainability of the Estonian language in all spheres of life, including higher education and research.

*„For the preservation of Estonian as a language of higher education, developing attitudes and sensing **personal responsibility** are even more important than national measures.“*

Study of the State of Estonian Language (2017: 48)

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Thank you for your attention!
Tänan tähelepanu eest!

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