

100 YEARS OF THE ESTONIAN LANGUAGE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU IN ESTONIA (1919–2019)

On Monday, 1st December 1919 the university opened its doors for the first time as the University of Tartu of the Republic of Estonia. Estonia's national university was created by a rather small assembly that evolved around Peeter Põld (1878–1930) – the first curator of the university as well as the first Minister of Education for the Republic of Estonia. Although there were no more than 200 students, the Estonian-speaking university started out with a lack of lecturers, study materials and supplies. On top of everything else a significant proportion of the library's collection had been moved out to Russia. The same had happened to laboratory equipment.

It was during the early years when, due to shortage of professors of Estonian origin, Finns were considered the most attractive foreign professors to teach here. It was the Finno-Ugric background with similarities in languages that made them attractive in the first place. But the decision to incorporate and retain foreign professors had another advantage – the university obtained knowledge-based potential to train the next generation of the scientific community. In 1920, there were 73 researchers (professors and assistant professors) employed, of which 31 were Estonians. By 2018, approximately one hundred years later, there are 1,517 academic staff members, of whom 187 are of foreign origin.

The academic year of 2019/2020 is dedicated to the 100th birthday of Estonia's national university, for which a row of books is published, in addition to the organising of several special exhibitions and conferences. The culmination arrived in November when the University of Tartu Museum opened its new permanent exhibition “The University of Our Lives” along with the presentation of a commemorative coin and postage stamp issued to mark the anniversary of Estonia's national university. The anniversary weekend included the premiere of the large-scale composition for mixed choir and symphony orchestra, “...windship with oars of light...” by composer Pärt Uusberg in the Vanemuise Concert Hall; traditional torchlight procession; light show “The Spirit of Tartu” in the cathedral ruins at Toome Hill; and, an anniversary ball “Roots of the Future” at the Estonian National Museum. The weekend concluded in more moderate but noble tones on Sunday, 1st December with an anniversary service in St John's Church after which a public ceremony was held in the University of Tartu's assembly hall.

Tartu, August–October 2019

Kadri Asmer
Art Historian and
Project Manager of Estonia's National University 100