

25 YEARS OF UNIVERSITY OF TARTU COLLEGE (REGIONAL) IN PÄRNU

In May 2021, the oldest regional unit of the University of Tartu celebrated its 25th anniversary. The following overview represents the author's vision of the origin and development story of this institution of higher education and research, focusing on topics hopefully of interest to a wider audience.

History and origin: local initiative and Pärnu School of Economics

The positive influence of universities and other institutions of higher education and research on economic and social development was recognized in the 1980s, when in many countries (especially in Scandinavia, where regional policy has been more important and the experience greater) regional institutions of higher education and research were established. Such institutions can be independent or regional institutes of universities. Both alternatives have their advantages and disadvantages, and one does not exclude the other entirely. However, resources are always limited and general research and educational policies, directed either at centralisation or decentralisation, have their effect, too. There are examples of initially independent institutes that have become a part of bigger universities, as well as contrary examples.

In the 1980s, Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost gave an opportunity to develop foreign relations. It is noteworthy that Pärnu has a long relationship with its twin town Vaasa in Finland, where the post-secondary School of Economics started in 1968 and gained the university status in 1991. Naturally, with this leading example, the idea of Pärnu as a university town started to emerge. Similar ideas have been in many regions of Estonia, but notably, Pärnu has been a part of the history of the University of Tartu as a university town, when Academia Gustavo-Carolina was transferred to Pärnu in 1699. Unfortunately, not for long, as in August 1710, Pärnu capitulated to the Russian army in the Great Northern War and regardless of promises to maintain the university in Pärnu, it was still discontinued.

A significant role in the idea of establishing an institution of higher education and research in Pärnu played units of medical rehabilitation and marine research, which had already been operating here for decades. The idea was developed at the end of the 1980s by an informal group which consisted of representatives of the aforementioned units and other enthusiasts, including the author. Officially, the idea was recognised in 1990, when the City Council of Pärnu adopted a decision “*to open an institute or a faculty of the University of Tartu to develop scientific justifications and programmes for the study of resorts, tourism and recreation, and to train respective personnel*”. These developments were led by the example of the twin town Vaasa and resulted in establishing Pärnu Post-Secondary School of Economics in 1991, which ended up being the predecessor of Pärnu College. Even though the alternative idea of an independent institution was on the table until the establishment of the University of Tartu college, it was a lot easier and quicker to establish a university college at the time. Behind such development was on the one hand, local initiative and support, and on the other hand, the regional policy of the government and the University of Tartu.

25 years of Pärnu College: on the search of its place and direction

At the beginning of the 1990s, there was a shift from command to market economy and it was only wise to start with entrepreneurship and economics. One of the aims of regional institutions is to avoid the efflux of active young people from the region, and instead attract them to stay, as many prefer to work or operate where they graduate. As Pärnu is a recognised summer resort, the other natural field of study was tourism. These two fields of study that started from the School of Economics are still the main fields of study in Pärnu College; in 1998, the social work administration curriculum was opened, which can also be studied today. At the end of the last decade, the college started to offer Master's studies and the first international programme in English was launched for wellness and spa service design and management. Thus, it could be said that the study of resorts that was initially planned, exists. The other initial field marine studies did not succeed, as shortly after opening the marine ecosystem management programme, it was closed due to lack of interest.

Not to underestimate the importance of financial resources, I would emphasise that the most significant part of establishing a regional institution of higher education is finding the right people. It is beneficial if there are local people, who have the ability and motivation to embark on an academic career, then probably they will not transfer anywhere else. As such people are difficult to find, it is imminent to also employ people from elsewhere, although keeping them is harder. For years (2001–2019), the author managed the department of entrepreneurship and remembers from the earlier years advice given by a colleague in the UT Faculty of Economics: *if you start forming your personnel from people who are not wanted elsewhere, you will not get far*. Yet, especially in the beginning, the advice was difficult to follow. Employment and salary conditions are better in Tartu and Tallinn, and many people have their family and other ties there. Research and development require cooperation and closeness between colleagues, and all that makes hiring new people more difficult. The founders of Pärnu College were 'imported' but later the alumni became potential employees. Other units, specifically the Faculty of Economics, were of great help to develop our faculty members, especially in the earlier years when we did not have Master's studies. This changed later and hopefully doctoral studies will start in the near future, which subsequently will improve the situation. Doctoral studies presume competent supervision and professorships; supervising doctoral students is one of the conditions for attestation – thus, one cannot exist without the other.

Years ago, during an informal discussion with colleagues the question of whether our college is complete or mature came up. One could provide a scientifically grounded answer to the question, however, the author had a spontaneous idea: the college is complete when its first alumnus becomes a professor. Within 25 years this has not happened and probably will not happen within the next decade. Hopefully, some of employed alumni will become a doctor in the near future, but years of research will then be needed to meet the requirements of the professor's position.

Pärnu College has become multidisciplinary, providing higher education on the first and second level, particularly in the field of social sciences. Examples can also be given from other fields, e.g. specialisation on wellness and spa management in the international

Master's programme, or sports management or production management (closed by now) in the curriculum of entrepreneurship and project management. The last-mentioned specialisation was developed to meet the expectations of entrepreneurs in the region. However, interest in the specialisation on production management was small, which led to the inevitable closure of that specialisation. Provided examples illustrate the most essential contradiction for regional colleges: they should offer the widest possible range of specialties to meet the personnel expectations of local entrepreneurs and the study objectives of young people; however, in order to succeed, they should specialise in a narrower field.

In general, specialisation tends to slow down the adaptability of higher education institutions, which is increasingly necessary nowadays; and a narrowly specialised regional college would only meet the needs of a monofunctional region. On the other hand, there is a need to go deeper, which in turn requires specialisation. Therefore, a reasonable compromise needs to be found, and this applies also in research: new and original knowledge is often created at or between the interfaces of different fields.

Pärnu College has been criticized by both sides over the years. Besides tourism and the resort status, production is also represented in the region, therefore, a shortage of technical specialties is obvious. On another hand, clearer focus is expected at the university and national level. This forced the college to define its focus area. Due to the diversity of existent fields, it seemed difficult, but the focus was defined with the uniting concept of services. The updated development plan has an ambitious goal of becoming an international competence centre for (wellness) services. As the field of services is wide, ongoing discussions are held on whether and how to limit the field.

Concluding remarks

This article is the story of a regional unit of a university, which is a case with its own specificity. The case of Pärnu proved that emergence and functioning of a sustainable regional unit requires local support and initiative, which also enabled obtaining the necessary public investments. The material and financial base is a prerequisite, but even more important is the staff. It is difficult to ensure the quality of teaching by using only part-time lecturers from elsewhere, which does not encourage research and development. Thus, it is important to form so-called core of its staff, able to give a significant part of the lectures, contribute to the curricula development, and preferably do research. The university or its unit is not complete without research and despite the pressure to teach and engage in other activities, more attention should be paid to it.

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