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English-Medium Studies in the Estonian National University: Globalisation and Organic Change

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Introduction

As observed in the early twentieth century by A. Gramsci, “Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it signifies that a series of other problems are beginning to impose themselves,” referring to a reorganisation of cultural hegemony.¹ It

¹ Antonio Gramsci, “Quaderni del carcere (Prison Notebooks)”, 29, 1935. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers: 1971).

is, perhaps, no surprise that a host of events touching on “the language question” have been organised recently in Estonia, accompanied by debates in the public media. Estonia has, in the past decade, joined both the European Union and NATO, and has undergone dramatic social and political changes domestically. At the same time, higher education on the global level has undergone an explosion in pressures to internationalise and rationalise teaching and research; Estonia joined the Bologna process early and has signed on to other moves to unify the European Higher Education and Research Area. Most domains of public life and social structure have undergone re-organisation in the past two decades.

The conference on language shift at universities, which inspired the present contribution, was organised in Autumn 2013, when the University of Tartu also celebrated twenty years of English-medium studies and began compiling its Development Plan for the period until 2020.² Marking the actual beginning of English-based study at Tartu may be subject to debate, but it is clear that in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Estonia entered a new period in many fields, including social demographics and education. This paper focusses only on the post-Soviet period, and is not concerned with the longer view on various languages of tuition used over Tartu’s nearly four centuries of existence. The authors of the paper have been involved in the University of Tartu’s international study programme development, international student recruitment, and mobility – on the policy and administration side – for approximately one decade. Hence, in describing the latter period of English-medium programme development, we rely to a large extent on our own experiences and discussions with colleagues.

Language shifts have occurred before, but the influx of English seems to be unique. The very communication patterns and interconnectedness of today may help create this appearance, but they also play a role in making this different from earlier language shifts. Today, everyone is entitled to voice his or her opinions; both media and

² Another conference organised that semester was “Twenty Years of English-Language Studies at the University of Tartu: What’s Next?” which both celebrated two decades of international studies and discussed future policy: see www.ut.ee/et/twenty-years-english-language-studies-university-tartu-whats-next (20.10.2014).

the democratic process demand that platforms be available for those opinions to be voiced and heard. Additionally, the ongoing changes are very rapid, and much more dependent on that which is happening in the society beyond the ivory tower, even globally. This underscores the powerful forces behind the move toward English instruction, and the reason English seems to pose such a threat to academic work in Estonian and other small languages.³ On the other hand, the hegemonic dominance of English may not be as permanent as it currently seems. Indeed, in another two decades, it is possible that English will not have cemented its global position as a *lingua franca* but will rather have ceded the central role to accommodate other major languages and shifting power structures.

The current changes in language balance and international outlook are felt on every level of the university, and the “language question” rears its head in a wide array of contexts, from lower school classrooms to the University of Tartu’s Vision Conference, held in April 2014. Questions concerning language policy clearly need more open debate. The academic world is less isolated than in earlier generations – the “language issue” sits alongside other ubiquitous terms such as employability, relevance to society and interdisciplinarity. In 2013, a total of 579 international degree students were studying at the University of Tartu, making up 3.6% of the student body; 8.6% of academic staff were international. Hence, as the University of Tartu achieves various goals of internationalisation and as it drafts its next Development Plan, this is an appropriate moment to take stock of the progress of English-medium studies until now, and to review the debate on the topic.

Development of international programmes

The Estonian language is Estonia’s prized possession – its most unique asset and the strongest glue binding the nation – as well as its greatest challenge in meeting today’s calls for internationalisa-

³ See, e.g. Ulrich Ammon, “Global scientific communication. Open questions and policy suggestions.” *AILA Review* 20 (2007), 123–133; and Robert Philipson, “English, a cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages?” *European Journal of English Studies* 10(1) (2006), 13–32.

tion. These calls stem from both economic arguments and the socio-political context. It is highly important from the perspective of the Estonian nation to maintain Estonian as a language of instruction in schools and universities.⁴ For incomers, however, the language poses some obvious obstacles, including a general perception of its “difficulty” and the low likelihood of immigrants having studied the language previously: it is not a foreign-language option in most countries of origin, either for children in schools or for adults, let alone being a popular choice.⁵

If Estonian universities have an interest in drawing international students in larger numbers than the dedicated few interested in Estonian language and culture, then they must offer the possibility of studying in languages other than Estonian. This has been clear for some time. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the movement toward English-language study had a slow beginning, followed by much faster growth in recent years. Previous to 1991, the University included Russian-medium curricula and drew a student body from across the Soviet Union in certain fields, but these students, though non-Estonian, were not classified as international. As set forth in the introduction, this paper’s focus is on the period which began in 1991, after which English-medium instruction became a possibility.

The first bilateral institutional agreement was signed with Turku University in 1987. However, it was when the University of Tartu (UT) joined ISEP (International Student Exchange Programs⁶) in 1992, and welcomed to Tartu the first ISEP and other exchange students (who spoke neither Russian nor Estonian) that the need for developing English-language courses to offer exchange students became clear. This was complemented by the new opportunity for Esto-

⁴ See below for various documents enshrining this principle, including the *Estonian Higher Education Strategy*, 2006–2015, the *Development Plan of the Estonian Language*, 2011–2017, and the *Universities Act*. Also see Josep Soler-Carbonell (forthcoming), “University language policies and language choice among Ph.D. graduates in Estonia: the (unbalanced) interplay between English and Estonian”, *Multilingua* 33(3-4), 415-443.

⁵ However, let it be noted that an effective programme for supporting Estonian language teaching abroad is in place. For more information, see www.hm.ee/index.php?046907 (20.10.2014).

⁶ See www.isep.org for more information (20.10.2014).

nian students to go abroad, which also required having courses to reciprocate with. Hence, the following year, UT was the first in Estonia to develop a full semester programme to offer international students, “Semester in the Baltics”, coordinated by Prof. Paul Kenkmann. This was offered directly through Lamar University, and drew a full group of students in its first year. This module became a regular semester programme the following year, 1994, and has been offered continuously since then.

The year 1993 also saw the founding of UT’s EuroFaculty (to become today’s European College, as of 1998), in order to bring international scholars and lecturers to Tartu, aiming to modernise the field of Social Sciences in Estonia. This scheme was directed primarily toward teaching domestic students, meaning that both sides of the English-medium studies coin were already in place two years after the re-establishment of independence: international scholars teaching Tartu’s domestic students, to broaden competence, as well as international students coming to Tartu for their education.

Two years later, the foundation was laid for international degree-seeking students, when the integrated programme in Medicine opened its doors with two years of English-taught studies, after which international students had the chance to join the regular Estonian programme. Because of the difficulty of learning the language in the short space of time, alongside regular medical studies, the twenty students attending this programme were primarily Finnish – indeed, the two years of English-language studies were designed primarily with this cohort in mind. Hence, for the last twenty years the English-medium medical programme has mostly attracted Finnish students, helping make Finns the most numerous nationality in the international student population at UT.

Though the basis on which international student numbers are calculated may have changed over the years, the available statistics show that around 150 international degree-seeking students were enrolled at UT in 1995. In addition to Finns studying Medicine and Estonian-taught disciplines, the second largest group of international students (around 30%) came from the Russian Federation and mostly represented Finno-Ugric ethnic groups. The Estonian universities have been teaching students from the Finno-Ugric minority nations in the Russian

territory since 1992.⁷ In addition to these, students with various personal histories and motivations came from abroad to study in Estonian-taught programmes, but their numbers were inevitably small.

Nevertheless, these were auspicious beginnings: a full semester in regional studies implemented a mere two years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the first groups of degree students matriculated annually in the medical programme in the second half of the 1990s. There followed a lengthy plateau, however, where these remained the only programmes taught in English alongside some individual English-taught courses, with little support for further development, either among academics or in the administration. Meanwhile, the University joined the European Union's Socrates Erasmus mobility programme in 1998, which was also instrumental in the move toward bringing internationalisation into the University's core activities.

The more central role of international relations could be seen in such official moves as the founding of a Centre for Baltic Studies to coordinate English-language courses in Social Sciences in 1999, the first institutional competition to develop centrally funded international courses (taught in languages other than Estonian) in 2000, and the campaign to join the prestigious Coimbra Group of Universities, which led to membership in 2003.

International Degree Programmes: Phase One, 2005–2011

The new phase of English-taught programme development began in 2005, when the first full international Masters degree programme was launched, based on the Baltic Studies module; the programme has undergone various changes, but remains in operation today as the Masters in Baltic Sea Region Studies. This marked a new era in UT's international studies. The University Development Plan (A2008, adopted at the end of 2003) named four "breakthrough" areas, including both internationalisation and the strengthening of the national university.⁸ An Office of International Relations was formed

⁷ *Kindred Peoples Programme I* (1999-2004), see: www.fennoungria.ee/index.php?id=20173 (20.10.2014).

⁸ Tartu Ülikooli arengukava 2008, University of Tartu Development Plan 2003–2008.

in 2004, a new International Marketing team launched the quest for degree programmes that would meet the demands of the international market, and some faculties were beginning to take an interest in developing English-language programmes.

Experience with international exchange students boosted the interest of academics to take part, and many faculties had begun to offer a large enough number of assorted courses in English to satisfy incoming international students in their fields for at least one semester. A critical mass of international presence was achieved in some academic units, and this was probably the single most important factor in changing attitudes toward English-language study.

In addition, funding mechanisms were developed at this time both within the university and on the national level which greatly supported the development of (and attention to) English-medium teaching. The first graduate schools were launched in 2005, encouraging international and institutional collaboration. Two new international Masters programmes followed the first in 2007, and additional ones were launched in each successive year through 2011, as shown in Table 1.

The six-year period from 2005 to 2011 can be characterised as a period of energy and excitement in pioneering international studies at the University of Tartu, supported and encouraged by national and European funding, as well as a healthy rivalry with competitors, as other domestic universities caught up with and (on occasion) surpassed Tartu in the amount of English-language offerings and other universities in the region also drew international students in increasing numbers. In addition to the graduate schools, the national DoRa programme⁹ was implemented in 2008 (funded in large part from the European Social Fund), in order to support doctoral and master-level studies and internationalisation, giving further fuel to the drive to internationalise.

Both marketing wisdom in the context of growing competition and UT's own perspective on market demand underscored the need to differentiate the study programmes offered in order to target top international students. This led to attempts to devise unique programmes and increasingly forge and emphasise the connection to the labour market. Hence, international programmes did not supplant existing Estonian-language

⁹ 2008-2015, see more information at: <http://adm.archimedes.ee/stipendiumid/en/programm-dora/> (20.10.2014).

programmes, but were, instead, launched alongside them. This opened new fields up to international students as well as providing a supplementary opportunity for Estonian students, and it often translated into cross-disciplinary studies which augmented the more traditional disciplinary programmes taught in Estonian. Some programmes were taught in parallel with Estonian programmes (the Masters in Semiotics is the best example, taught in parallel because of the very differing levels of preparation among domestic and foreign students), but for reasons of economy and limited human resources, this was not the preferred model.

Table 1. Degree programmes offered in English at the University of Tartu, 2005–2011.

Listed according to year of first enrolment, by area of teaching and research (Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural and Exact Sciences, Medicine). Programmes offered jointly with other Estonian universities are marked in italics. Doctoral programmes are not included, as many doctoral seminars took place in languages other than Estonian, depending on both the students and the professors.

Year launched	Humaniora	Socialia	Realia et Naturalia	Medicina ¹⁰
2005		Baltic Studies (today: Baltic Sea Region Studies)		
2006				
2007			Applied Measurement Science; Financial and Actuarial Mathematics	
2008		European Union-Russia Studies		
2009	Semiotics	Wellness and Spa Design and Management	<i>Software Engineering;</i> <i>Materials and Processes in Sustainable Energetics;</i> <i>Cybersecurity</i>	

¹⁰ As noted above, the two-year Medicine programme was already in place before 2005, and a full degree programme in Medicine was launched after Phase One, in 2013.

2010		Bachelor's in Business Administration
2011	<i>Sound Engineering Arts;</i> Design and Development of Virtual En- vironments	<i>Crossmedia Production</i>

English-language courses

The launching of quite a number of English-language degree programmes, naturally, did not occur in isolation. The overall numbers of courses taught in English at the University grew significantly during this period. These numbers may give a better sense of the real internationalisation of the university during this period, as they show the growth of English-language offerings intended for all students, including also domestic and short-term visiting students.

In the 2009–2010 academic year, 6% of all courses attended by students were taught in English. Just three years later, in 2012–2013, the proportion rose to 10%¹¹ and UT was operating 13 English-taught degree programmes in the I and II cycle, as shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows the total numbers of courses taught in English, including both those taught as part of international degree programmes and those which were taught in the framework of Estonian programmes or as electives and optional courses. The table reveals tremendous variation, both in proportions of courses in English and in the balance in attendance of those courses between domestic and foreign students. Nevertheless, the share of English-taught courses does not demonstrate the level of internationalisation of a particular unit, as the units are not of comparable size, in either courses or numbers of students. The European College, with its interdisciplinary bent, a Masters programme in EU-Russia Studies and a healthy host of international scholars, shows the greatest proportion of English-language courses and draws two thirds of its students from abroad.

¹¹ The numbers we cite here exclude language teaching, as these skew the picture in terms of actual internationalisation on campus. The most recent data we are able to include at the time of writing comes from the academic year 2012-2013.

Table 2. English-taught courses in the 2012–2013 academic year.

Listed by academic unit, according to balance of attendance (between domestic and international students). In the “Students attending” column, the total for the two student groups is not 100% in cases where the courses were also attended by continuing education learners.

Academic unit	English-taught courses		Students attending	
	Number	Proportion out of all courses	Domestic	International (degree and visiting)
Faculty of Medicine	17	4%	26%	73%
European College	21	66%	31%	67%
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration	41	18%	37%	62%
Faculty of Sports and Physical Education	1	1%	40%	20%
Faculty of Law	30	10%	55%	42%
Pärnu College	38	14%	61%	39%
Faculty of Science and Technology	48	5%	63%	33%
Faculty of Social Sciences and Education	75	10%	71%	28%
Faculty of Theology	13	13%	77%	22%
Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science	48	18%	79%	19%
Faculty of Philosophy	165	12%	80%	16%
Viljandi Culture Academy	47	8%	87%	11%
Narva College	25	11%	99%	1%

The table illustrates that in most of the academic faculties and colleges, English-taught courses are also attended by Estonian students, and some units have achieved quite an even balance between them for the year 2012–2013. The shift toward international classrooms which are academically challenging and enhance multiple competencies, for both local and international students, has been one of the overt goals of the University’s internationalisation pro-

cess. Some units have a very small share of international students, such as the regional colleges in Narva and Viljandi, which are just beginning to build their international networks and whose incoming student population is currently still rather modest.

The information given in the table speaks to the question: who is served by the English-medium courses? How much does English-medium teaching serve to educate domestic and international students together, thereby indicating true internationalisation of teaching at UT, and in what proportions do the two groups participate? This allows us a glimpse of what is happening inside the faculties and colleges which have devoted energy to developing English-medium studies, and how well the reality matches the rhetoric.

Goals of developing English-medium studies

Before moving on to discuss the language policy framework and language attitudes, it is worth pausing to ask what was behind the initial motivation for international programme development. It was clear that internationalisation was gaining importance in the assessment of institutions – evaluation, rankings, and student recruitment all provided real and powerful motivation for a push toward internationalisation on all levels. However, the authors of this paper believe that these measurable, more pragmatically motivated factors were paired with a genuine ambition to enhance the quality and standards of the university through international development. Certainly the aims of developing English-medium courses and degree programmes were and still are integrated with the larger aims of internationalisation at UT, including:

1. Enhancement of core activities (primarily teaching and research);
2. Support for international experience and collaboration among academic staff;
3. Development of competitiveness and intercultural competence of graduates;
4. Promotion of visibility and international reputation of UT and Estonia.

Despite a sea change in attitudes toward internationalisation during the first decade of the new millennium, much ambivalence was

expressed regarding the effects of opening up to a larger international component of the student body. This can best be understood by looking at the discussions around language policy and the national university's responsibilities to the Estonian language, culture and nation.

Language policy

According to many, Estonia's greatest achievements are connected to the strong position which has been forged for the Estonian language. As Estonians form a relatively small (or "medium-sized"¹²) linguistic community (numbering just under one million speakers), it is remarkable that Estonian is "clearly among the 50 most technologically developed languages in the world," as Professor Karl Pajusalu has emphasised.¹³ The maintenance of an entire educational system in the language, including tertiary and doctoral studies, is just as laudable, and just as telling. In line with the aims set forth in the national constitution, the University of Tartu – the flagbearer for Estonian higher education – also has specific responsibilities toward Estonian culture. UT is a comprehensive, research-intensive university with a dual mission: to aspire to world-class achievements in research while also serving as the national university of Estonia.¹⁴ UT's responsibilities as the national university are not limited to teaching and researching the fields of Estonian language and culture, but rather encompass the broad remit of ensuring that Estonian-language tertiary education is guaranteed across disciplines.

A central, crucial task of the Estonian nation is to preserve and develop the Estonian language. The use of the language in tertiary education is considered necessary for an educated Estonian public but also for the vitality of the Estonian language, the maintenance of high-level terminology across disciplines and the existence of scientific discussion to support policy decisions in various fields. This is not seen to

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- ¹² Francis Xavier Vila & Vanessa Bretxa, "The analysis of medium-sized language communities", Francis Xavier Vila (ed.), *Survival and development of language communities: Prospects and challenges* (Multilingual Matters 150), (Bristol, 2013), 1–17.
- ¹³ Mart Zirnask, "Estonian language and culture: Multilingual Estonian", *University of Tartu Vision Conference 2032* (UT Special Edition, 2014), 41–45. See also, e.g. Martin Ehala, "Väike-Eesti ja Suur-Eesti", *Postimees: Arvamus*. 14.03.2014.
- ¹⁴ UT 2009. University of Tartu Strategic Plan, 2009–2015. www.ut.ee/en/university/strategy (20.10.2014).

be in conflict with the expectation that all graduates have some level of proficiency in English. This aim is promoted by the inclusion in all curricula, including those taught in Estonian, of some foreign-language components. However, the more English-language courses emerge, serving the international students and dictated by an increasing body of international lecturers, the more the “language issue” seems to come up amidst expressions of concern, dismay, and reassurance.

The question of language is addressed in many official contexts, from the Estonian Constitution to the *Strategy for the Internationalisation of Estonian Higher Education*,¹⁵ which laid the groundwork for supporting international curricula in their early years, and the current *Development Plan of the Estonian Language, 2011–2017*.¹⁶ The *Universities Act*¹⁷ stipulates that Estonian is the language of university tuition, but the power to decide upon the use of other languages is vested in the university councils. The *Development Plan* mandates that institutions of higher education should develop their own language policies, while it contains more specific details on the teaching of Estonian. The *Estonian Higher Education Strategy, 2006–2015*,¹⁸ outlines some specific measures, such as a programme for supporting the compilation of tertiary-level textbooks and teaching materials in Estonian. The *Strategy for the Internationalisation of Estonian Higher Education, 2006–2015*, while setting plans for increasing mobility and “valuing the international dimension,” also takes care to point out that: “In opening up Estonian higher education and introducing the international dimension into every curriculum, we must ensure the preservation of the Estonian language as the primary language of teaching and research at institutions of higher education.”

In this context, then, the *Language Principles of the University of Tartu*, approved by the University Council on 30 January 2009,¹⁹

¹⁵ Strategy for the internationalisation of Estonian higher education, 2006–2015. www.studyinestonia.ee/about-us/higher-education-in-estonia/strategy-documents

¹⁶ Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. Development Plan of the Estonian Language, 2011–2017. http://ekn.hm.ee/system/files/Eesti+keele+arenguka+va+inglise.indd_.pdf (20.10.2014).

¹⁷ Estonian Universities Act. 1995. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/28729> (20.10.2014).

¹⁸ Estonian Higher Education Strategy, 2006–2015. www.hm.ee/index.php?popup=download&id=7653 (20.10.2014).

¹⁹ Language Principles of the University of Tartu, 2009. www.ut.ee/en/university/documents (20.10.2014).

are forward-thinking, as they are the first official language policy document in Estonian institutions of higher education, and yet fairly cautious, primarily striving to find a balance between the national university's "responsibility for the preservation and development of national culture for the nation and people of Estonia" and the understanding that "openness and tolerance are the pillars of academic culture." Language competence in the "native language, the official language and various foreign languages" is underscored as a key component of the policy, but English is mentioned distinctly as the *lingua franca* of academia.

Likewise, the University's Strategic Plan 2009-2015 guarantees "that studies in the first level of higher education are based on Estonian-language curricula in every field of study, which also contain courses or modules taught in other languages." The restriction to the first level of study has been questioned as posing a possible conflict with the *Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015*, but there is not necessarily a conflict. That document mandates that Estonian-taught curricula be maintained on every level in every field of study: hence, if at least one curriculum on every level of a particular field of study is taught in Estonian at some university, then this mandate is fulfilled (see also Soler-Carbonell, forthcoming, for discussion of a similar tension between the *Development Strategy of the Estonian Language, 2004-2010*,²⁰ and the *Strategy for the Internationalisation of Estonian Higher Education*²¹).

Tartu's history has included university tuition in various languages: from Latin, during Swedish rule in the seventeenth century, to German in the nineteenth, and Russian at the end of the nineteenth century, and finally Estonian, dating to the establishment of the Estonian Republic in 1918. From that time on, Estonian-medium tertiary education has been supported, although research was widely published in Russian in the Soviet era, and Russian-medium curricula were also taught in parallel to Estonian. In this perspective, it is no wonder that the threat of English is seen as real, and that

²⁰ Developed by the Estonian Language Council, see http://www.eki.ee/keelenouko-gu/strat_en.pdf (20.10.2014).

²¹ Strategy for the internationalisation of Estonian higher education, 2006–2015. www.studyinestonia.ee/about-us/higher-education-in-estonia/strategy-documents

safeguards have been created for Estonian as a viable language of research and higher education.

However, the usefulness of an institutional language policy with no specific monitoring procedure or tools to enact its principles and aims is questionable.²² Compare the generality of UT's *Language Principles* and lack of implementation plan with the specificity of directives and monitoring of the Irish Official Languages Act²³ and implementation in universities in Ireland.²⁴ Currently the role of English – and its potential threat to the domain-general use of even many medium-sized European languages – seems to be snowballing.²⁵

Public discussion: English-medium instruction

Hence, we turn from the mandates of official documents to statements by opinion leaders in the national media. In 2012, the newly appointed Rector of the University of Tartu, Volli Kalm, caused uproar among humanities scholars and language advocates when he said, at the Pärnu Leadership Conference: “The difficult questions regarding the future of Estonian Higher Education are tied to the competitiveness of Estonian HE compared to English HE. Master’s and doctoral studies are inevitably becoming more English-based... We are often unaware of the price of preserving Estonian-language higher education.”²⁶ (Quotes are translated by the present authors.)

This sparked a flurry of responses, both supportive and critical, many of which took the statement above out of context and continued

²² Council of Europe. 2003. *Guide for development of language education policies in Europe: From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education. Draft 2002, 17.* www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/FullGuide_EN.pdf (20.10.2014).

²³ Official Languages Act 2003. Available at: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie> (20.10.2014).

²⁴ See, e.g., John Walsh, “Pushing an open door? Aspects of language policy at an Irish university”, V. Vihman & K. Praakli (eds.), *Negotiating Linguistic Identity: Language and Belonging in Europe* (Nationalisms across the Globe, 14). (Oxford: Peter Lang: 2014)

²⁵ See, among others: Robert Philipson, “English, a cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages?” *European Journal of English Studies* 10 (1) (2006), 13–32; and Virve-Anneli Vihman & Jürgen Barkhoff, “Introduction: The shaping of linguistic identity in Europe”, V. Vihman & K. Praakli (eds.), *Negotiating Linguistic Identity: Language and Belonging in Europe* (Nationalisms across the Globe, 14) (Oxford: Peter Lang: 2014).

²⁶ Pärnu Leadership Conference, 12.10. 2012, <https://www.konverentsid.ee/blog/>

a more general conversation about the changing balance of languages. The ensuing debate displayed the deep emotional resonance of the “language question” in Estonia during a period of global collaboration, paired with Europeanisation and homogenisation.

On one hand, the Rector of the Estonian Business School Arno Almann responded “...that studying – especially business – only in Estonian is pointless for tomorrow’s students. We are moving step by step toward entirely English-language education and I believe that EBS will surely get there before 2020.”²⁷

On the other side of the public debate, for instance, UT Professor of Biosemiotics and Head of the Semiotics Department Kalevi Kull, made a stirring statement in the widely read daily newspaper *Postimees*, calling for Estonian universities to remember their duty to uphold and teach in Estonian: “A culture is alive only if it teaches its young people in the language of that culture... The first duty of Estonian universities is to teach Estonian youth the values, customs and speech of Estonian high-culture. We can justify teaching the youth of other cultures in those fields in which we are the best...”²⁸

Rector Kalm eventually responded to the debate in the same national daily by clarifying his initial intention to underline that “...delivering internationally competitive higher education in Estonian is expensive, but it is our nation’s, universities’ and especially the University of Tartu’s responsibility.”²⁹

This was an especially intensive discussion, but the debate continues today. Looking to the future of Estonian Higher Education ahead of the University’s Vision Conference, in April 2014, Kalm modified this slightly. Though he repeated the idea that “The preservation and development of Estonian language and culture is the duty of the national university,” he also went on to narrow the application of this sentiment: “Of course teaching in Estonian is important at the level of the first cycle of higher education. The understanding that the culture or the research language will survive only if we maintain

²⁷ Arno Almann, “EBSi rektor: äri õppimisel ainult eesti keeles puudub mõte”, <http://majandus24.postimees.ee/rubriik/juhtimine> (15.10.2012).

²⁸ Kalevi Kull, “Kalevi Kull: eesti keel valitsegu eesti ülikooli”, *Postimees. Arvamus*. 18.10.2012.

²⁹ Volli Kalm, “Volli Kalm: ahistavad keelehirmud”, *Postimees. Arvamus*. 25.10.2012.

teaching in the national language on all levels, including doctoral studies, is becoming outdated.”³⁰

The same publication, accompanying the Vision Conference, contained voices from linguists discussing Estonian as a research language.³¹ If a language does not fill some of the functional domains society requires, then other languages will take its place. UT’s Dr. Tiit Hennoste voiced the most concern regarding the future of Estonian, and is quoted as saying: “The fewer roles it fulfills, the weaker the language becomes. In this sense, it is quite clear that English-language publication in research is destroying Estonian [...] Do we want to conduct top-level research or not – there is a clear contradiction coded into this question. In many ways it’s a question of making a decision.” On the other hand, he continues, “a small nation cannot manage to uphold all possible institutions, even including all fields of education, in its own language.”³²

Hence, although Estonian is “among the 50 most technologically developed languages,” Estonian society is nevertheless wary, and University scholars and leaders are far from complacent.

The language question: Points of concern

Ongoing discussions reveal several recurring issues regarding development of English-language studies. The question of limited resources always underlies discussions of what to prioritise. In most European countries, university budgets are stretched and changing strategies call for careful analysis. While internationalisation may have the global reputation of being a profit-making venture, at UT this aim has been excluded in the interest of maintaining quality and finding the best students. Although selected disciplines might be in a position to sell their curricula internationally, UT’s general understanding is that internationalisation will continue to require additional resources for some time, rather than earning a profit. In

³⁰ Marju Himma, “Volli Kalm: The challenge is to maintain fundamental research”, *University of Tartu Vision Conference 2032* (UT Special Edition, 2014), 7.

³¹ See also, e.g., Soler-Carbonell (forthcoming) for discussion.

³² Mart Zirnask, “Estonian language and culture: Multilingual Estonian”, *University of Tartu Vision Conference 2032* (UT Special Edition, 2014), 44.

Estonia, not only are financial resources cause for consideration, but human and administrative resources are also limited: if a decision is made to teach a field in English, then there may simply not be enough academic staff to teach in Estonian, not just in one university but in the nation overall; the numbers of people qualified to teach a particular field are often quite limited in a population of 1.3 million.

Secondly, the quality of English-medium instruction is a matter of intense scrutiny, as it should be. The intended effect of translating a curriculum to both a different language *and* a broader auditorium is to raise the quality, as stated in the aims of internationalising curricula, but the process carries with it an implicit risk of resulting in just the opposite. This risk may surface during any element in the process, from the lecturer's linguistic skills, time and ability to recreate the teaching process in English, to the linguistic level and academic competence of the international students recruited, and the suitability of the new curricula to their knowledge and interests.

Finally, behind all discussions of language policy and language use in Estonian universities is the issue of whether and how much of a threat English poses to Estonian-language education. This question may arise regardless of whether a faculty or college has plans to develop courses or curricula in English, as so many teaching materials are in English and any visiting lecturers are much more likely to teach in English than in any other language. Hence, the motivation and need for Estonian graduates to learn English are much stronger than the motivation of international students to learn Estonian.

One reason some units have made the decision to begin teaching a particular field in English is the decline in population and lack of domestic students interested in the discipline. Academic units which only a few years earlier had no intrinsic interest in opening up to international students may feel the need once the negative demographic trends of Estonian society have an effect on matriculation numbers. In this case, teaching in English and attracting students from abroad may be one of the few options for keeping a particular programme running, and for supporting an academically motivating environment for domestic students as well.

The changing environment

During the first period of development of English-taught degree programmes, “Phase One” as described above, not only were internal attitudes and conditions changing, but the external environment was changing as well. New funding mechanisms were the primary direct influence. The Estonian Ministry of Education and Research translated the Internationalisation Strategy into specific measures to support the development and marketing of international curricula and increasing mobility; this took place while the European Union was also stepping up measures to encourage global cooperation. The environment which supported efforts to devise new degree programmes also supported international mobility. Incoming scholars had a major influence on attitudes toward internationalisation among academics, as well as actual opportunities for developing international courses and curricula. The growth in numbers of international scholars and students resulted in an augmentative effect, which prompted many more academic units to take initiative in English-medium teaching.

Hence, the environment has changed on many levels. The growth in international student body and individual success stories have an effect. But even domestic students have shown a greater readiness to attend courses in English. Their perception of the need for English, regardless of how they intend to apply their studies, and their English-language proficiency have been growing steadily. The growth in mobility cannot be underestimated. As opportunities are increased for students and staff, international experience comes to affect domestic experience in a multitude of ways. The academic faculty now perceive the need for internationalisation in a much more personal way than a decade ago. Their increased readiness to develop and teach courses in English is evident, and to a large extent comes from experience working with international faculty and students.

We would claim that the development of English-taught degree programmes has entered a new phase. Up until now, the presence of international faculty and general interest in internationalisation has brought more English-medium courses bit by bit. However, the rhetoric of the top administration, the readiness of academic units, and the new system in Estonia of performance indicators used to as-

ness and fund universities all point to a new approach. The indicators and goals related to internationalisation set by a Performance Agreement based on the contract between the universities and the Ministry for Education and Research³³ and by the University's own strategies suggest that we may be seeing more rapid change in the near future. The recent decision to teach Philosophy on the Masters level in English (beginning in Autumn 2014) was seen to be radical, particularly as this is such a fundamental discipline. Yet, this may be only the first example of basic curricula undergoing a language shift. With each new field turning to English, the need for broader discussion will be felt more acutely.

Agreement will have to be reached regarding (1) how much English-medium teaching the University of Tartu is willing to allow, or is interested in developing, and (2) how to guarantee the development of Estonian as a language of Higher Education alongside the continued development of curricula in English and how to guarantee the harmonious coexistence of the two languages. Both questions may be handled at both the institutional and the national level, and should involve an amount of debate and consensus regarding division of labor and concerted cooperation among the universities. However, both questions necessarily also point to the role of Tartu as the national university, as well as the leading research university in Estonia³⁴: this duality of roles, though paradoxical, may not be in conflict, and may in fact each support the other. However, if English-language teaching continues to grow at the rate currently predicted, then the two missions will each need a clearer strategy to preclude inadvertent missteps and to avert disastrous situations: both international reputation and maintenance of the national culture are critical to the University of Tartu's goals, and those of the nation.

Hence, walking the tightrope between English and Estonian may become less manageable in the next decade. Uncomfortable decisions

³³ See, e.g., §4.4 in the Contract, available at <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/130012013003> (20.10.2014).

³⁴ UT has been the only university in Estonia and the Baltics positioned as high as the 351-400 bracket in the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* for three years, in 2013, 2012 and 2011 (see <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/world-ranking/range/351-400>) (20.10.2014).

may need to be made regarding whether the academic community – and society at large – is ready to accept Anglicisation in certain fields. Questions regarding quality assurance need to be answered and safeguards must be implemented, regardless of the language of teaching. In order to ensure high teaching quality, good competence in English among both students and staff must be guaranteed and enabled. When competence to teach a field in Estonian is lacking in the country, then a limited set of options present themselves: specialists can be sent abroad for their education, or international lecturers can be brought to Estonia to educate a new generation of specialists, as was done in 1993 with the EuroFaculty. Both solutions involve putting the language question on the line, but these steps are inevitable in a medium-sized linguistic population. Finally, how to approach internationalisation as a performance indicator is also a strategic decision, which necessarily involves introspection regarding aims and competences, but also external comparison and international market analysis.

Conclusions and final thoughts

We see the development of English programmes up to now as an example of “organic growth.” Top-down competitions to allocate funds for programme development have not met with success unless they are collaboratively executed in line with the academic interests of teaching staff. The factors which lead to academic units perceiving the need for English-medium programmes are complex, and those which lead to action are not easy to pinpoint precisely. A mixture of experience with international exchange students and staff mobility, demography – reduced numbers of domestic students matriculating to programmes – and ambition might paint a fairly accurate picture. Additionally, the value of positive examples of “success” and international students in one field to inspire academics in other units and fields must not be underestimated. Incoming scholars, mobile students and faculty build an English-language competence base, all of which leads to an appropriate context to consider developing English programmes, and all come from the inside and bottom-up. These are the elements which lead “internationalisation at home” to becoming not just a slogan, but a real aim. Once this is adopted by a faculty or department, it becomes easy

to integrate with other basic goals, such as broadened competence in teaching and pursuit of excellence in research.

Alongside the question of motivation, the Estonian social context always requires looking at language attitudes, language policy and language balance. Thus far, the changes we have described in the linguistic balance at Tartu have not meant replacement. The addition of English as a medium of instruction alongside Estonian can mean the combined usage of two languages in various ways, from academic literature to the language used in lectures and teamwork. In order for this sort of coexistence of two languages to work well, UT's members must support the complementary functioning of two languages of instruction – both by promoting language learning and honing skills of academic expression, and by setting positive examples of the dual use of languages in class and in research projects. For the younger generation in Estonia, the increased use of English in homework and classwork is increasingly seen to be a natural extension of the foreign language preparation they have received prior to entering higher education, and a clear bonus in terms of employability and honing practical, personal and professional skills.

It is self-evident that UT requires a broad pool of scholars to achieve its mission “to act as the leading force driving the development of knowledge-based society in Estonia” through innovation, cooperation and service to society.³⁵ This necessarily means increased internationalisation, and this in turn leads to the increased presence of the English language in situations where Estonian is not an option. The challenge is to find the right linguistic balance. Another voice from the autumn of 2012, when UT's Rector Kalm inspired debate about language in higher education, came from Kalle Tammemäe, the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at Tallinn University of Technology: “The universities are always ready to... search for that always-moving point of balance which would, on one hand, meet the global quality requirements of higher education and research, and on the other, meet the needs of Estonian businesses and the linguistically sensitive expectations of Estonian society.”³⁶

³⁵ University of Tartu Strategic Plan, 2009–2015. www.ut.ee/en/university/strategy (20.10.2014).

³⁶ Kalle Tammemäe, “Kalle Tammemäe: eesti keel päsib kohati läbilööki”, *Postimees. Arvamus*. 18.10.2012.

Tammemäe's words ring true, and we hope they are not overly idealistic: in terms of the universities' ability to listen to, estimate and meet the expectations of society, as well as their dedication to the pursuit of both global and local prominence, delivery of excellence, and equal commitment to both research and education.

As Professor Martin Ehala has said in various opinion pieces,³⁷ an open, inclusive approach to Estonian identity, including linguistic identity, will help the sustainability of the culture and nation much more than a rigid, inward-facing approach. If the universities can lead the way to a more tolerant society, as well as bringing new, educated people from abroad to contribute to economic, cultural and social progress, then the internationalisation of universities will serve several aims, including that of survival and continuity of the nation.



Virve-Anneli Vihman, *PhD*, on Tartu Ülikooli eesti keele vanemteadur, oli välissuhete osakonna juhataja 2004–2011 ja rektori rahvusvaheliste suhete nõunik 2011–2013.

Ülle Tensing, *mag* (kirjalik tõlge) on Tartu Ülikooli rahvusvahelise õppe peaspetsialist.

³⁷ See, e.g. Martin Ehala, "Rahvustunne töötab rahvuse püsimisele vastu", *Postimees. Arvamus*. 19.10.2011 and Martin Ehala, "Väike-Eesti ja Suur-Eesti", *Postimees: Arvamus*. 14.03.2014.