

# Conflicting Attitudes about the Place of Estonian at the University of Tartu: Interpreting Survey Data on Local and International Staff

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Scientific interests: Estonian as a second language, language policies, multilingualism, education policies, Baltic languages

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**Abstract.** During the last decade, the universities in Estonia have internationalized their staff and student body to such an extent that the language environment in academia has undergone considerable changes. To react to the internationalization and Anglicisation of higher education and protect the use of Estonian in academia, the University of Tartu renewed its language policy in 2020 and commissioned a survey in 2021 to gain a better understanding of the implementation of the policy and its academic staff members' attitudes towards the policy. This paper is based on the survey results. The survey was conducted by the authors in 2021 and 2022 and examines the attitudes of the local and international academic staff on acquiring Estonian and using it as the working language of the university. The results show a major difference in the attitudes of the local and international staff members. The local staff is in favour of language policies intended to advance the acquisition and use of Estonian in academia, whereas the international staff is generally interested only in acquiring introductory Estonian skills. Their motivation to continue learning Estonian is low since English is used as the common language of communication and work at the university. Based on the results, the authors present recommendations for designing inclusive institutional language policy and flexible forms of learning Estonian.

**Keywords:** language policy, higher education, Estonian, English, University of Tartu

## **Prieštaringos nuostatos dėl estų kalbos Tartu universitete: vietos ir užsienio akademinų darbuotojų apklausos duomenų analizė**

**Santrauka.** Per pastarąjį dešimtmetį Estijos universitetai taip internacionalizavo savo personalą ir studentų būrį, kad labai pasikeitė kalbinė akademinės bend-

ruomenės aplinka. Siekdamas reaguoti į aukštojo mokslo internacionalizaciją bei anglizaciją ir apsaugoti estų kalbos vartojimą akademinėje aplinkoje, Tartu universitetas 2020 m. atnaujino savo kalbos politikos gaires, o 2021 m. iš straipsnio autorių užsakė tyrimą, kurio tikslas – geriau suprasti universiteto kalbos politikos įgyvendinimą ir akademinio personalo narių požiūrį į šią politiką. Pristatomas straipsnis parengtas remiantis šio tyrimo rezultatais. Apklausa atlikta 2021–2022 m. Ja siekta išsiaiškinti vietinio ir užsienio akademinio personalo požiūrį į estų kalbos mokymąsi ir jos, kaip darbo kalbos, vartojimą universitete. Rezultatai rodo, kad vietinių ir tarptautinių darbuotojų požiūriai labai skiriasi. Vietiniai darbuotojai pasisako už kalbos politiką, kuria siekiama skatinti estų kalbos mokymąsi ir vartojimą vykdant įvairią akademinę veiklą, o tarptautiniams darbuotojams paprastai rūpi tik įgyti pagrindinių estų kalbos įgūdžių. Pastarųjų asmenų motyvacija toliau mokytis estų kalbos menka, nes bendravimo ir darbo kalba universitete yra anglų. Remdamosi gautais rezultatais autorės pateikia rekomendacijų, kaip kurti įtraukią institucinę kalbos politiką ir lanksčias estų kalbos mokymosi formas.

**Raktažodžiai:** kalbos politika, aukštasis mokslas, estų kalba, anglų kalba, Tartu universitetas

## 1. Introduction

Universities in Estonia are increasingly international in terms of the background of their staff and students, yet they are also heavily influenced by the state's policy of promoting the official language (Rozenvalde et al. 2023). In this paper, we present an overview of the results of a recent language survey carried out at the University of Tartu. The survey was commissioned by the university administrators to implement the policies of sustaining the Estonian language as the main language of higher education at the university. The survey examined the implementation of the university language policies from the perspective of its academic staff (both local and international employees) and their attitudes towards the policies that have been adopted to advance Estonian language acquisition and use at the university, mostly for administrative purposes. These policies have been formulated to tackle the language issues that arise out of the growing internationalization of the University of Tartu.

According to the University of Tartu statistics, the number and percentage of international staff and doctoral students at the university have grown very rapidly in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, there were 118 international academic staff members at the university (8.5% of all the university's academic employees). By 2022, there were

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<sup>1</sup> [https://statistika.ut.ee/ut/?\\_inputs\\_&keel=%22en%22](https://statistika.ut.ee/ut/?_inputs_&keel=%22en%22)

291 international academic staff members employed at the university (17.7%). The majority are at the beginning of their academic careers. Also, the number of international doctoral students doubled since 2016: from 158 (12.6% of all doctoral students) to 335 (31.3%) in 2022. In the local policy discourse, the growing number of international staff and Ph.D. students has been problematized as such a situation can lead to the interruption of the “intergenerational transmission” of the Estonian language in higher education institutions in ten to twenty years, as 20% of the academic staff are currently 60 or more years old.<sup>2</sup>

To respond to the rapidly changing language situation at the university and the accompanying fears, the University of Tartu renewed its *Language and internationalization principles* in 2020. The University identifies itself as an “international national university”<sup>3</sup> that preserves and develops the Estonian language, but also values the linguistic and cultural diversity of the international community who studies and works there. The survey, the results of which we present in this paper, was aimed to illuminate how these principles are implemented at the university according to its local and international academic staff members, and how important they consider upholding both principles.

The survey<sup>4</sup> was conducted by the authors at the University of Tartu in 2021 and 2022. The survey aimed to understand the attitudes of the University of Tartu academic staff on acquiring the Estonian language and using it as the working language of the university. More specifically, we looked for answers to the following questions:

- 1) To what extent is the top-down language policy of the University of Tartu implemented according to the academic staff?
- 2) How important do academic staff consider the policy?
- 3) What does the international staff lack in learning and using the Estonian language?

Using the example of the University of Tartu, we analyse how the interplay of different levels of language policy happens. With a top-down language policy, it is to some extent possible to direct the language choice of individuals, but for a successful language policy, it is necessary to understand what is happening at the grassroots level (Spolsky 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/eestikeelse-akadeemilise-tooturu-kriis/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ut.ee/en/content/language-and-internationalisation-principles-university-tartu>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ut.ee/sites/default/files/2023-03/Tutvu%202023.%20aasta%20keelehoiakute%20uuringu%20aruandega%20%28inglise%20keeles%29.pdf>

## 2. Estonian as a language of higher education – a view into the history and the current situation

The age of Estonian as a medium of instruction in higher education and research began in 1919 when the University of Tartu became a university with Estonian as its language of instruction in the newly independent Republic of Estonia. Nevertheless, much of the teaching was still done in foreign languages during the national university's first years of operation and to keep the university running, scientists and lecturers were invited from abroad. By 1940, the end of the first period of independence, Estonian had become a full-fledged language of higher education and research.

Estonian remained a medium of higher education and research publications also for the entire duration of the Soviet occupation until 1991. Additionally, Russian was used in academia. Since 1975, dissertations could only be submitted for defence in Russian (Klaas-Lang 2003). After Estonia regained its independence in the early 1990s, Russian was still used to a great extent – nearly one-fifth of students were enrolled in Russian-medium programs at that time. English-language instruction was marginal (Klaas-Lang, Metslang 2015: 168), and started gaining more importance only approximately ten years ago (Rozenvalde 2018).

In the academic year 2021/2022,<sup>5</sup> there were 18 institutions of higher education in Estonia: six public universities and one private, seven public and 4 private institutions of professional higher education, with a total number of admissions of 44,611 students. Just ten years ago there were approximately 70,000 students in Estonia, thus the number of students has decreased significantly in the past years due to Estonia's population decrease.

Currently, it is possible to study at universities and institutions of higher education either in Estonian, Russian, or English: 13.7% of full-time students study in English, 0.1% in Russian, and the rest study in programs that are officially implemented in Estonian.<sup>6</sup> Estonian has to remain the dominant language of instruction at the first and second levels of higher education according to the Higher Education Act (HEA 2019: § 3 (3)). The act does not regulate the language of instruction for doctoral studies, which is mostly implemented both in Estonian and English (for local students) or English (for international students).

Estonian higher education has become international in every way during the past decade. This is true in terms of students, lecturers, and research fellows as well as English-language study programs. In the academic year 2019/2020, 5528 inter-

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.haridussilm.ee/ee/tasemeharidus/haridusliigid/korgharidus/uliopilased>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

national students were admitted to Estonia (12% of the total number of students). With its percentage of international students, Estonia shows up as a relatively attractive destination in comparative tables while naturally remaining far behind Anglo-American countries. In Finland, for instance, 8% of students were international in 2019, and the OECD average is 6%.<sup>7</sup> The process was accelerated by the 2013 higher education reform which cancelled the tuition fees for Estonian-medium studies and allowed universities the opportunity to increase their income via English-medium study programs (Rozenvalde et al. 2023).

### **3. International or/and local – higher education language policy trends in Europe and Estonia**

Higher education and language policy research in Estonia and other Baltic countries has indicated the undergoing internationalization of universities in this region. This has brought about a noticeable increase in the relative importance of English as a language of instruction and as a working language in academia (cf. Klaas-Lang 2016; Soler, Vihman 2017; Selliov 2017; Rozenvalde 2018; Rozenvalde, Klaas-Lang 2022). The Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands have always been presented as the success stories of internationalization (Saarinen 2012; Risager 2012; Haberland, Mortensen 2012; Lindström 2012; Söderlundh 2012; Soler 2019). However, it is highly significant that in recent years attitudes have started to prevail, even at the level of governments, that recommend pulling the breaks on the increase of the number of international students and the spread of English in universities (Nissen 2019: 228; Soler, Rozenvalde 2021). The Nordic countries have tried to find a way for higher education institutions to avoid the critical increase of English both in studies and as the working language of the organization. The policy recommendations for universities (Gregersen et al. 2018) include the need for academic staff to acquire the local language.

In the previous fifteen years, Estonian language policy in higher education has undergone a great change from stressing the importance of higher education internationalization to emphasizing that both Estonian and English need to be used in local academia. It is possible to draw parallels with trends in the language policies of other European countries and universities which have gone through a similar evolution and now perceive threats to sustaining their national language, culture, and local intelligentsia in the flows of internationalizing universities (Klaas-Lang 2022).

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.arena.fi/wp-content/uploads/Raportit/2020/Ulkomaalaiset%20opiskelijat%20Suomen%20korkeakouluissa%20raportti.pdf?\\_t=1599214685](http://www.arena.fi/wp-content/uploads/Raportit/2020/Ulkomaalaiset%20opiskelijat%20Suomen%20korkeakouluissa%20raportti.pdf?_t=1599214685)

In today's academic world, it is difficult to plan a researcher's career without knowing English. English is indispensable in academia. However, the question is how to promote multilingualism and attitudes that place value on the local languages in addition to, but not instead of English, at universities.

#### 4. Theoretical considerations

The overt language policy of the Estonian state and its national university – the University of Tartu – is heavily geared towards the protection of the Estonian language in all spheres of life, including higher education. Nevertheless, the University of Tartu is mostly bilingual from above, having institutionalized (Nelde et al. 1996) both Estonian and English (Rozenvalde, Klaas-Lang 2022). Both languages have become accepted and taken for granted in local academia, not only in grassroots practices but in (covert) top-down language policies. Such language policies raise the prestige of both Estonian and English among their speakers: top-down ideological support for certain languages can affect their use at the grassroots level, even if such language choices are not functionally meaningful for individual language users (Mortensen 2014).

Studies on language use in multilingual university and work settings have shown that overt language policy can differ considerably from actual language use (Kingsley 2013; Söderlundh 2013; Lin 2022), i.e., the practiced language policies (Bonacina-Pugh 2012). This is in line with Spolsky's (2004, 2009) approach to language policy, which we follow. According to him, the essence of language policy lies in the choice between different language possibilities that people have at their disposal. As such, language policy can be exercised by anyone. Language policy studies on agencies have confirmed that "policy is co-constructed, negotiated, and appropriated by many different players or actors at a variety of LPP levels" (Glasgow, Bouchard 2018: 11).

Still, language use in institutional contexts, such as higher education and research, can to a great extent be enforced from the top down. Michael Gordin (2015) who has studied the history of international languages of science, such as Latin, French, German, Russian, and English, argues that these languages have not gained their international position as academic *lingua franca* on their own, but have been heavily supported by institutional language policies. Gordin stresses the importance of agency, particularly that of institutions in creating languages of science. A similar argument can be made about the languages used in higher education: they are not simply born but are created institutionally with the help of language policies. Still, for such language policies to succeed, they have to be grounded in actual language practices and attitudes of individuals (Spolsky 2009).

## 5. Data and methodology

The paper is based on survey data that were collected at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 at the University of Tartu. We conducted an online survey that aimed to understand the attitudes of the University of Tartu academic staff on acquiring the Estonian language and using it as the working language at the university. In the survey, the respondents were, first, asked to assess to what extent the institute (faculty) at which they work has implemented the university's language policy concerning the acquisition of Estonian and its use as the university's working language. Second, they were asked to rate the importance of these principles. Finally, they were asked open-ended questions about what supports or interferes with implementing the principles and what should be done at the university to implement the principles more successfully. The survey was addressed to members of the councils of 10 institutes and all international academic employees of the same institutes (including international Ph.D. students). The survey sample was formed based on the percentage of international staff (including international Ph.D. students) of the institute. In two institutes international staff accounted for slightly more than half of all academic employees, in three institutes international staff comprised about a fourth or a fifth, and in the remaining five institutes, the number and percentage of international employees was very low.

All in all, survey invitations were sent to 452 people. The questionnaire was completed by 163 respondents, i.e. 36.1% of those who received the survey. Half of them (82 respondents) also answered at least one open-ended question. About half of these respondents (43) were local, and the rest (39) were international staff members. The total volume of the written comments was 11,621 words. The answers given on the Likert scale were entered for quantitative data analysis into the statistics program SPSS 27, and the text comments for qualitative analysis into the program Atlas.ti.

## 6. Survey results

The survey confirms that the common language of communication for the university's local and international staff is mostly English. According to the respondents' self-assessment, they most commonly have a good command of English. Most international staff respondents, according to their self-assessment, speak Estonian but usually a little only. Most of them have learned at least basic Estonian and communicate with Estonians, but the majority do not communicate in Estonian at all or do it rarely.



Firstly, the results of the survey show that the respondents struggle with assessing the implementation of the university's language policy at their institutes. Both the results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis demonstrate that the university's language policy often remains unclear for both local and international employees, especially for the latter. Several written comments point out that the university's language policy is not understandable, and raises questions and even opposition. Example (1) reveals that the respondent's personal standpoints are quite similar to the university's current language policy – international staff is offered opportunities to learn Estonian; long-term international staff should learn the language; short-term employees are not required to learn the local language. Still, the respondent feels that the standpoints are contrary to the university's language policy and the university requires everyone, including employees working under short-term contracts, to acquire Estonian and international staff to teach in Estonian.

- (1) *If you desire that your staff speaks a basic amount of Estonian after x years, go ahead, but do realize that teaching in an unfamiliar foreign language is quite difficult. On the other hand, for the social life of your staff it is very beneficial to know the language of the country that they live in, so please continue to offer possibilities to learn Estonian (and personally I feel that long-term staff should grab the possibility). Some will never learn it, some will leave after three years (what right do you have to require a person to learn Estonian if you only offer that person a short-time contract?) (Realia et Naturalia, position unknown, L1 = other).*

Secondly, academic staff members who can rate the implementation of the policy at their institutes think that the language policy is mostly being implemented. Assessments about implementing the remaining principles do not vary much between faculties, i.e. it does not depend on the proportion of international staff at the institute or the origin of employees.

Thirdly, and most notably, the Estonian L1 using employees consider the university's language policy important (example 2); by contrast, international staff regard several of the language policy principles concerning the learning of Estonian and its use as the working language as unimportant (example 3). Local employees, especially in institutes with a smaller number of international staff members, are concerned that the university language policy is not observed enough and compromises are made to gain some benefits. This can be, for example, the international renown of a researcher, the amount of grants brought to the university, or even that the researcher wants to come here at all. The solution is seen in a stricter language policy: adhering to the agreed principles of language learning and use, disseminating information about the agreement, and checking that the principles are observed.



- (2) *Even the management does not dare to demand much else from top-level foreign researchers with their own grants. <...> language requirements must be taken seriously and not formally. All employees with a permanent employment contract should speak the Estonian language at least at a conversational level (Realia et Naturalia, associate professor, L1 = Estonian).*
- (3) *the role of the university as a part of the state-building effort together with the current language principles is contradictory with what I believe should be the main objectives of the university: high-quality education and high-quality research. Maybe the objective to promote the Estonian language should be left to some other university, not to the one that might have the highest potential for quality research. <...> Having Estonian as the working language is contradictory with the strategic objective of the U Tartu being an international university (Socialia, lecturer, L1 = other).*

Most international employees, however, consider unimportant the principles that the university motivates all its doctoral students to achieve the advanced level in Estonian, asks its permanent employees to acquire some Estonian, and that the working language of the university is Estonian. Importantly, international employees with good or excellent command of Estonian assess all these principles as important.

Thus, the survey reveals a contradiction in university discourse between national ideology and international orientation, which creates tensions in university members' attitudes. Although local staff members say that they do not understand the university's language policy and its implementation completely, they largely agree with the university's language and internationalization principles. The local employees attach particular importance to the principles supporting the teaching and use of Estonian at the university. They express the opinion that both Estonian and English must be used at the university and that to be able to continue to use Estonian as a working language (the language of administrative communication) at the university, it must be taught to international staff.

By contrast, international staff members tend to underline that in the university's work environment, they can communicate in English. In their opinion, the opportunities to learn Estonian could be accessible but the learning and use of the language should not be compulsory or imposed by a strict language policy. Mostly, they favour a soft policy, creating opportunities for language learning and use: let the university offer and motivate, but not oblige; let it be the person's own choice whether they want to learn and use Estonian or not. However, most of the respondents whose mother tongue is other than Estonian have studied Estonian, which shows that they have been interested in learning the language, at least at the basic level.

What do the international employees feel they lack in learning and using the Estonian language? The respondents gave three typical answers: 1) there is not enough information about the university's language policy; 2) there is not enough information about language learning possibilities or the possibilities are limited and scarce; 3) they have no confidence about continuing their academic career in Estonia (especially those who would like to stay in Estonia). The survey shows that international staff is uncertain about continuing their career at the University of Tartu. Project-based and fixed-term employment contracts do not provide them with the necessary job security. Almost half of the respondents were young Ph.D. students / junior research fellows who stay at the university for a fixed term and have to look for a job after graduating from their Ph.D. program. They are uncertain about investing their time and effort into learning a language they might not need after graduation.

The answers also reveal that international employees feel they lack the possibility to learn and practice Estonian and probably do not know that the university offers the possibility. The university's work environment might not be supportive for learning Estonian because, in this work environment, effectiveness in communication plays an important role. If it can be achieved using English as a common language of communication, there may not be sufficient opportunities to practice Estonian skills in everyday communication. Community-based language learning, which means acquiring a language by using the target language outside the classroom in different contexts and real-life situations and via social practice, is an important and effective language learning method (Clifford, Reisinger 2019). However, it might not happen by itself if the second common language (usually English) is present in the work environment and for it to work, it needs institutional guidance.

## **7. Discussion and recommendations emerging from the survey for the implementation of the language principles of the university**

The results of our survey show that employees' assessments of the extent to which the principles are applied at their institutes vary slightly between faculties for some principles. They mostly assess that the university's language policy is implemented at their institutes. However, the most notable result of the survey is that the attitudes towards the acquisition and use of Estonian as a working language at the university vary significantly between local (mainly Estonian L1 users) and international staff, not between faculties and institutes. Whereas local employees tend to attach importance to the university's language policy that is aimed at sustaining the use of Estonian as a working language at the university, the international staff

members are opposed to such a policy and often consider English to be enough. Moreover, the attitudes of international staff who assess their Estonian to be good or excellent are more like the attitudes of local staff than those of international staff who rate their Estonian skills as poor or who do not speak Estonian at all.

It remains unclear for international employees whether ensuring the sustainability of the Estonian language really has to be the responsibility of the University of Tartu and how this nationally important topic matches the research and teaching objectives that aim for international success. Importantly, the international respondents' comments reveal that their interest in learning Estonian is often limited to the basic level, and their motivation to continue learning Estonian is rather low since English is used as the common language of communication and work. Also, the mobility and insecurity of the academic career reduce the motivation to learn the local language. International staff members may not be interested in learning the Estonian language but they are interested in their success in research and teaching to improve their future career prospects.

Based on the study, the authors have also made several suggestions to the management of the University of Tartu for making the institutional language policy more inclusive, so that the interests of both foreign employees and local staff were considered. Firstly, we have suggested emphasizing the role of heads of units more than before, including the promotion of the attitude that it is important for international employees to learn Estonian, and use, for example, soft demands in attestation and performance interviews. Secondly, it is necessary to increase flexibility in language learning, for example, to create separate courses for employees only and to offer community-based language learning possibilities. In addition to learning Estonian in the classroom, international employees also need more contact and joint activities with locals. Estonian can be used in work meetings when a translation or language technology solution has been made available, or participants have agreed upon parallel language use beforehand. Finally, the university could offer a more stable career prospect to international employees with Estonian language skills.

The language of higher education, like the language of science, does not arise by itself, but needs institutional support as well as consideration of actual practice (Spolsky 2009; Gordin 2015). The goals of the vision documents of the institutional language policy should be understandable and the activities to realize these goals acceptable to the university staff. However, the top-down language policy can create conditions at the university in which its employees would pay more attention to the possibility of using the local language instead of English when choosing the language of communication.

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