

TNP 3

Sub-Project One

'Languages for language-related industries and professions'

NATIONAL REPORT – ESTONIA

Background

In Estonia, the main employers' organisations are the Estonian Association of Employers and the Estonian Chamber of Commerce. The former has in recent years started a lively dialogue with vocational schools. The dialogue arose from an acute need, since on the one hand, companies experienced a dismal lack of qualified skilled labour while vocational schools were notorious as the main "producers of unemployment". In the case of many vocational schools, we are still faced with the situation where graduates go to the Unemployment Office almost straight after graduation. However, the whole system of vocational schools is currently undergoing thorough reforms: small schools are being merged into large centres that have the means to acquire up-to-date facilities, new specialties are being introduced, etc. The process – which receives considerable support from EU structural funds – is conducted in extremely close cooperation with the Estonian Employers' Association.

However, when it comes to higher education, which, of course, is also the main source for specialists in language-related industries, employers publicly admit that they are not yet ready with a dialogue with the universities. The fact was revealed, inter alia, at the Development Conference of the University of Tartu – the leading university of the country – in 2003, where the university's efforts to reach out to the potential employers were described. Research conducted by the university's career service shows that employers who need specialists with higher education are generally satisfied with a university degree (preferably from a state university as opposed to a private one) and make their further personnel choices predominantly on the basis of personality traits. The need for dialogue is also less urgent in view of the fact that an overwhelming majority of university graduates find employment after graduation (unemployment after 6 months after graduation is less than 5%, and one must also bear in mind that the period is too short for conclusions: many graduates have excessively high expectations after graduation, looking for senior positions and substantial salaries, which means that they initially turn down realistic offers which they later accept). The final conclusion of an extensive study of employment patterns in Estonia carried out by the Faculty of Economics at the University of Tartu is that university graduates are in the very best position in the labour market and constitute virtually no problem in terms of employability.

In fact, universities are faced with a diametrically opposite problem: employers who need relatively educated personnel often stop short of a university diploma. While this is no longer true of the public sector where laws have been introduced setting down minimum educational requirements for specific positions, employers in the private sector appear to prefer to hire students who have almost but not quite completed their BA studies. In practice this generally means that the students lack a few credit points, usually those accorded for the graduation thesis. There might be several reasons behind the situation, e.g., shortage of qualified labour or the possibility to pay less for nearly the same qualifications by referring to absence of diploma.

Anecdotal support exists for both reasons. A part of such students take 6 or more years instead of the officially designated four to obtain their BA degree (this pertains to the “pre-Bologna” system of four years of BA studies; the new, 3+2, system is just going to yield the first crop of BA graduates in 2005). Another part never return. Statistics about students who graduate in 5 years were recently calculated at the University of Tartu. On average, 40 per cent of students graduate in five years. In the Faculty of Philosophy (= the Faculty of Arts) that is the most pertinent to language-related industries, the percentage is roughly 30. Since universities are going to be funded on the basis of MA degrees awarded, the situation is regarded as grave.

Nevertheless, universities have already set up or are in the process of setting up their own career services. The first such service was established at the University of Tartu in 2001, other universities have followed suit, though their career services are yet too young to have conducted surveys of graduates’ careers’. In this report it will therefore be possible to bring data from the University of Tartu’s graduates only. The methodology, sampling, purposes and results of the study are available at <http://www.ut.ee/career/lopetaja/2003/index.html>

The following presents data on University of Tartu graduates of language-related specialties of the year 2003. However, the number of answers received is far too small for any reliable conclusions to be drawn. (For instance, Translation and Interpretation had approximately 40 graduates that year).

Participating language and literature students according to specialty

	Number	%
English	30	32,3
German language and literature	12	12,9
Estonian as a second/foreign language	16	17,2
Russian and Slavic Philology	14	15,1
Translation and Interpretation	9	9,7
Scandinavian Philology	5	5,4
Spanish language and literature	3	3,2
Finnish language and literature	2	2,2
French language and literature	2	2,2
Total	93	100,0

Salaries of the graduates

		Salary							Kokku	
		No answe r	alla 300 krooni	3001- 6000 kroon	6001- 9000 kroon	9001- 12000 kroon	12001- 15000 krooni	18001- 21000		üle 21001 krooni
inglise keel kirjandus	ARV %	11 36,7%	6 20,0%	8 26,7%	3 10,0%	2 6,7%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	30 100%
saksa keel kirjandus	ARV %	7 58,3%	1 8,3%	3 25,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	1 8,3%	12 100%
eesti keel võõrkeelenä	ARV %	1 6,3%	2 12,5%	12 75,0%	0 ,0%	1 6,3%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	16 100%
vene ja slaavifiloloc	ARV %	5 35,7%	4 28,6%	4 28,6%	0 ,0%	1 7,1%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	14 100%
tõlge (kirjali ja suuline)	ARV %	2 22,2%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	2 22,2%	4 44,4%	1 11,1%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	9 100%
skandinavis ka	ARV %	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	3 60,0%	2 40,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	5 100%
hispaania keel ja	ARV %	0 ,0%	1 33,3%	0 ,0%	1 33,3%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	1 33,3%	0 ,0%	3 100%
soome keel ja kirjandus	ARV %	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	1 50,0%	1 50,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	2 100%
prantsuse keel ja	ARV %	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	2 100,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	0 ,0%	2 100%
Kokku	ARV %	26 28,0%	14 15,1%	31 33,3%	11 11,8%	8 8,6%	1 1,1%	1 1,1%	1 1,1%	93 100%

The specialties are listed in the same order as in the previous table /English Language and Literature, German Language and Literature, Estonian as a Foreign/Second Language, Russian and Slavic Philology, Translation and Interpretation, Scandinavian Studies, Spanish Language and Literature, Finnish Language and Literature, French Language and Literature/

Language-related industries in the Estonian labour market

At the moment the main factor affecting language-related industries in Estonia is the country's recent EU accession. While supply for all specialists in all EU languages fell short of demand even before the accession, the gap is even wider now. The need for Estonian translators and interpreters in EU institutions is the same as that for other member countries, while Estonia's population is only 1.4 million, which means that proportionately more Estonians need to be qualified in the field. EU accession has also affected domestic market, though one cannot speak in terms of simple summation here: as a result of accession, the largest employer of non-free-lance translators – the Estonian Legal Translation Center – is being closed down. Also, as a growing number of Estonians are acquiring adequate skills – or more often what the persons concerned themselves perceive as adequate skills – in foreign languages (predominantly English), the need for translation is gradually being replaced by the need for editing, an increasing number of conferences try to make do without simultaneous interpretation and attendance at courses offering skills training in languages is slowly (though not dramatically) decreasing. However, these trends are not strong enough to affect the extraordinary popularity of foreign languages, particularly English, as the main specialty at universities and, even more, the stiff competition for programmes offering MA-s in Translation and Conference Interpretation.

At present, such programmes are run at the University of Tartu and at Tallinn Pedagogical University as well as at one private university (Eurouniversity). The programmes at the University of Tartu and at Eurouniversity have received full accreditation based on recommendations of an international board of experts. The programmes at the University of Tartu were established first (Conference Interpreting in 1999 and Translation in 2000) with considerable support from the Danish government. It could even be said that the Danish government realized Estonia's upcoming need for qualified interpreters and translators earlier than Estonia's own government. Copenhagen Business School and Aarhus Business School conducted extensive teacher training programmes for interpreting and translating, respectively. The interpreting programmes both at the University of Tartu and later at Tallinn Pedagogical University have also benefited from extensive backing from the Interpreting Services of the European Parliament and the European commission: not only have they received substantial funding for teacher training and student scholarships but also, representatives of the two services have been present at all the examinations, participating in evaluation and giving advice as regards teaching methods.

Owing to these factors, the Master's programmes in question can be described as language-related programmes best tailored to the needs of the labour market. Representatives of EU interpreting services took active part in designing the programmes in Conference Interpreting and the programmes in Translation were in part (though not wholly) modelled on the respective programme in Aarhus Business School which, in its turn, has largely based its programmes on feedback from graduates and needs analysis. An appreciable number of the graduates of the translation programmes are already employed by the various translations services of the European Union and the same applies to graduates of the interpreting programmes. In the latter case, however, the "success rate" is, for understandable reasons, been lower, since the yardstick is passing the European Commission's examination for freelance interpreters that is known for its rigorous criteria – in fact, an Estonian graduate of ESIT only passed it at the second attempt.

However, graduates of the programmes continue to fine-hone their skills at extension courses offered by the same teachers (the duration of the MA courses is currently only one year) and an increasing number are able to pass the examination.

All MA courses in interpreting and translation received a serious setback from Estonia's EU accession which to all intents and purposes vacuumed them of their teachers. To cite a case in point, only two of the teachers trained by colleagues in Aarhus Business School are still teaching at the programmes, and the interpreting programmes lost almost all their teachers: salaries at Estonian universities are not even remotely competitive with EU standards. Fortunately, a few teachers were left in Estonia due to family reasons and others have suspended their contracts rather than terminating them. Also, the programmes have been able to replenish their staff from the pool of their own graduates who for various personal reasons did not join the first wave of the exodus. However, in many cases these teachers have also, for instance, passed the EPSO concours and view their lingering in Estonia as temporary. And, finally, those teachers who have stayed are actively engaged in filling the void left in the local market by the departure of the best translators/interpreters.

On the positive side, Estonian universities were among the first to fully transfer to the Bologna system. This year, the first BAs whose studies lasted only three years are going to graduate. The MA programmes that follow the BA programmes last for two years which enables an even better correspondence between the requirements of the labour market and the setup of the programmes. This is reflected, first and foremost, in more attention paid to the second foreign language but also in the inclusion in the programmes of subjects such as Intercultural Communication. In the process of drawing up the new programmes, feedback from students and graduates played a very large part. The feedback was collected not only in the form of the standard university feedback questionnaires, but also in informal conversations and, most importantly, through several MA programmes that were explicitly devoted to the subject of comparing student needs and existing programmes.

Apart from the programmes, the Estonian market in translating and interpreting is affected by the Estonian Association of Translators and Interpreters. Collaboration between the universities and the association has been realized through participation in the Ministry of Education's Board on Translation and Interpretation where both parties have their representatives. Otherwise, however, the association tended until a few years ago to be a relatively closed club where membership was determined either by the chance of being the founding member or by recommendations by two members. No quality control measures have been in place nor has the association during more than a decade of its activities set up any examinations of its own to base its claims of quality on. If we add to this the fact that a number of senior members of the association have, despite repeated attempts, failed to pass the European Commission's examination for freelance interpreters, while a number of interpreters who have passed the examination or passed the concours for translators are not members, it is no wonder that its hold on the internal market – which for a time was relatively strong – has in recent years weakened. Their aim – to protect the market from unqualified translators/interpreters who work at dumping prices – is wholly commendable, yet they lack solid proof that membership in the association is guarantee for quality. In general, this means that quality assurance via internal mechanisms is essentially missing in Estonia.

As regards other language-related professions in Estonia (language teachers excluded), reliable information is simply missing.