

Developments in the governance of the University of Tartu 2023–2028

The university's role and **strategic goals** are agreed upon in the University of Tartu Act, the university's statutes, the strategic plan A2025 and the related thematic and faculty-based strategy documents. In managing the university, I am guided by the objectives and principles agreed upon in these documents and by the university's good practices, at the same time taking changes in the university's operating environment into account and analysing longer-term development scenarios. The strategic plan includes the ambition that in 15 to 20 years, the university would reach the level of strong Nordic universities that, based on international rankings, belong to the top 100 universities in the world. The university's progress in recent years suggests that this goal is within reach.

As a rector, I have been guided by our shared **core values**: academic freedom and autonomy, research-based activities, openness, cooperation, a human-centred approach, individual development and responsibility. The Rector's Office has worked as a cohesive and competent team, and a significant part of the objectives formulated in the 2018 rector elections have now been implemented. I am ready to take on the responsibility of leading the university in the next term of office.

The university's **governance model**, which was renewed in 2016, has proven its worth. We can continue to work for stable and balanced development that is based on trust, empowers managers at different levels and gives staff and students a voice. Stability in governance does not mean passivity or stifling growth: society and the research world are in a constant state of flux, and the university must use its intellectual capacity to actively interpret, support, guide and lead these changes.

The university, Estonia and the world are changing: many changes that were only recently considered to be future issues have already taken place, some we can predict, many we cannot yet even imagine. The **war in Ukraine** will continue to affect our lives for years to come, and the uncertain political situation takes a toll on the internationalisation of our universities, among other things. We have seen the vigorous development of new artificial intelligence solutions in recent months. How they will evolve and change the nature of research and higher education remains to be seen.

Several initiatives of the last few years, such as the creation of the **Centre for Sustainable Development**, the promotion of equal treatment and the development of a **mental health** action plan to support both students and staff need to continue. We are taking decisive steps to maintain the status of the **Estonian language** in our increasingly international university and to encourage our international graduates to find employment in Estonia. An ageing population and migration, new generations, economic and labour market changes, etc., require continuous modernisation of the content of teaching.

As a rector, my focus in the coming years will be on

- 1) working towards achieving a better balance between public baseline funding for research, development and innovation and competition-based funding instruments; towards continued growth in public funding for higher education to reach at least 1.5% of GDP in the coming years; and towards the modernisation of the system of student stipends, study allowances and loans as an important part of higher education funding;
- 2) increasing the salaries of university staff and ensuring career security for academic staff;

- 3) ensuring the next Estonian-speaking generation in all disciplines both at the university and in Estonian society in general;
- 4) achieving breakthroughs in the university's business cooperation and university-owned start-ups.

Below, I will discuss some key developments in the coming years in more detail. These are not in order of importance, and the list is far from exhaustive. I will be guided by the objectives of the balanced development of a comprehensive university, considering the interests of both Estonia and the university, its faculties and units.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

We provide high-quality research-based higher education that meets society's evolving needs in terms of content and competencies, as well as the time, place, form and duration of learning and possible combinations.

- We offer different forms of study and allow for personalised learning pathways. To this end, we develop e-learning and digital systems, including SIS2 and its data-driven learning analytics. We pay attention to the impact of the developing artificial intelligence.
- In renewing the content of curricula, we emphasise sustainable development, future skills and the capacity to implement practical projects. We cooperate with foreign universities and online learning platforms to ensure our students can access high-quality learning content worldwide.
- We use the opportunities offered by ENLIGHT and other international networks to boost mobility and update our international student strategy to attract the best and prepare international students for the Estonian labour market.
- We develop counselling services to support students' mental well-being and help them cope with their peculiarities and temporary challenges. We continue to build learning environments that encourage co-learning and direct contact with teaching staff, and to develop simulation environments that promote practical learning.
- We launch an Estonian e-university together with other Estonian universities. We choose topics in which we are strong or unique, and offer fully or largely online learning opportunities in different forms (courses, micro-credential programmes, full curricula) and with professional support, both in Estonia and worldwide.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

We maintain the reach and high standards of a recognised international research centre, providing financial support for internationally competitive and innovative research teams and involving top-level researchers.

- The development of basic research and viable research teams depends on increased baseline funding. The political agreement for the new government period must ensure a balance in the basic means of public research funding: the aim is that one third of the 1% of GDP allocated for research is baseline funding.
- At the same time, we also encourage researchers to apply for competition-based funding. An increase in funding does not happen by itself; researchers' efforts need recognition and effective support systems.
- We take responsibility for doing research on and providing solutions for sustainable development. As a comprehensive university, we have the advantage of being able to collaborate across disciplines to tackle complex challenges. The diversity of our disciplines is the university's strength in a context of clashing interests and needs – be it between nature and economy, cultural vitality and human well-being, or the preservation of nature.

- We also use the potential of interdisciplinary cooperation to enhance innovation and societal benefits, with a focus on, among other things, involving researchers in social sciences and humanities.
- We develop a strategic recruitment programme to attract talented colleagues from abroad and those returning to Estonia. The modern academic world is increasingly mobile, and the world's most talented researchers are rotating between the best research centres.
- We fulfil the mission of a national university in developing the national sciences, valuing both basic research and its applied output.
- We continue developing doctoral studies and the centres for doctoral studies. We take measures to enhance the value of the doctoral degree in society and increase the motivation of Estonians to take up doctoral studies.
- We create a post-doctoral programme at the centres for doctoral studies to support researchers' careers and promote research mobility.

SOCIETY AND INNOVATION

We strengthen the role of the university in guiding the development of society. We help increase society's scientific literacy and decision-makers' willingness to draw on the university's expertise in all areas when making decisions. We contribute to developing health care and the economy, disseminating sustainable thinking, technological innovation, achieving ecological balance, preserving and developing Estonian national culture, and fostering other areas.

- As a national university, we ensure the survival of Estonian society. We understand that in addition to teaching and research, we are also responsible for developing the Estonian language, culture and the modern Estonian-language education system.
- The University of Tartu is the university of all Estonia, and we continue to operate in all colleges. We strengthen the university's presence in Tallinn, among other things, by diversifying the specialisations offered there. We participate in the process of the just transition of Ida-Viru County.
- We support and value meaningful and professional research communication to increase the impact of the university and the academic community in society.
- We make better use of the European Commission's business grants to boost innovation and link the university's R&D and business: as a large part of the funding from the programme Horizon Europe is earmarked for business cooperation, we adapt our support structure accordingly.
- High-growth research-intensive companies created by our researchers are at the heart of the start-up landscape. In partnership with public authorities, we create a regulatory environment that allows researchers to become entrepreneurs while continuing to work part-time at the university.
- We set a strategic focus on developing the biotech sector. One aim is for university-owned companies to reach the unicorn status.
- We develop a sustainable operating model for the Estonian Biobank that will secure its prominent position among the world's largest biobanks.

PEOPLE AND ORGANISATION

The people of the university are at the heart of our work. We provide a supportive working and learning environment for all, implement a motivating career system and offer a decent salary. We ensure an Estonian-speaking new generation of academic staff in all disciplines.

- With the reform of doctoral studies and the renewal of the university's career model, the preconditions for securing the new generation of academic staff are in place, and we

continue working towards a decent salary level and a comprehensive academic career model to ensure job security, commitment to academic work, promotion prospects, the opportunities for flexible combination of teaching and research, and the valuing of teaching (in Estonian). We re-establish a central programme to ensure fair and dignified conditions of retirement with emeritus status.

- We keep physical and mental health and the prevention of burnout at the core of the university's sustainability by ensuring a good working and learning environment, equal treatment and opportunities, adequate recognition, self-development and career choices.
- Even though multilingualism is an integral part of top universities, for Estonia's national university, preserving and developing the Estonian language and ensuring the new generation of Estonian-speaking professionals both in academia and in society at large is critical. To achieve this, we pay even more attention to the acquisition of Estonian language skills by our international staff and students. We secure the status of Estonian as the main working language and increase the motivation and opportunities to learn Estonian. We create a culture in which parallel language use and translation technologies support the inclusion of international staff and students who do not yet have sufficient knowledge of Estonian.
- We put an emphasis on designing simple and well-thought-out work and management processes. A digital university is at the heart of support services. The university is only strong through the interaction of academic and support units: we value and empower the work of support staff and support units. For the quality of governance, we develop a culture of communication and participation and respect the specificities of the units. A measure of leadership sustainability is the preparation of young leaders and the involvement of students in the management decisions that concern them.
- We consider sustainability objectives in all university decisions, activities and investments. We invest in developing the working environment and a green campus, and we develop a crisis management plan to provide security. We expand the 21st-century technology campus at Maarjavälja, seamlessly combining research, studies and a pilot area for innovative green solutions.
- In cooperation with regional partners, we contribute to the functioning of international transport links and develop an open, motivating, safe and international living environment to make Tartu attractive for talented people from Estonia and abroad.

Toomas Asser

Rector

24 March 2023, Tartu