

“Today, as we celebrate the 90th anniversary of higher education in the Estonian language and Tartu University, we must continue to think as boldly and establish goals as high as was done by our predecessors 90 years ago. We are responsible for finding answers to today’s questions,” said President Toomas Hendrik Ilves in Tartu University, at the ceremony to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the university.

The head of state defined four questions: How should we ensure the survival of the Estonian nation, learning, and culture in these conditions? Which role should be fulfilled by our national university, our own *Universitas Tartuensis*, in the process? What reason should we have to recall today’s rectors, researchers and academic family in 25, 50, or one hundred or more years’ time, with the same gratitude that we feel today in complimenting our predecessors? And even more quintessentially and, luckily also, hypothetically: would today’s graduates of Tartu University be able to lead the nation, if necessary, through fifty years of night until a new light is born?

“There’s no ideal environment. Tartu University will never make it to the absolute top of the global rankings in all the specialities, even when supported by the wisest decisions and fattest wallets. Therefore, there is no need to despair when those who are the absolute best in their respective specialities and winners of international Olympiads continue their education in some other university,” said the head of state. “However, we should not make their decision to leave too easy. We need to ask whether the competition of universities on the one side and the mass university approach on the other can always be the best choice for Estonia? I’m afraid not.”

“While we go on struggling for student numbers, the benchmarks established for requirements will inevitably come down – taking the content of higher education and value of diplomas with them as they fall,” said President Ilves, adding: “If we allow this to happen, our youth will vote with their legs. They will not be choosing Tartu. Neither will they be choosing the universities of Tallinn. They will choose Helsinki, Humboldt, Cambridge or Columbia. Some of them will never come back. And so, Estonia will lose some of its brightest brains.”

“Let us ask: is Tartu University the first choice for the demanding young individuals of Estonia who wish to pursue their education, and will it remain so? The honest answer will be ... yes ... in some specialties, indeed,” said the head of state.

“If we really are proud of the fact that Juri Lotman, persecuted in the State University of Leningrad on account of his Jewish origin, came back to Tartu to pursue world-class research, we should ask, as Edward Lucas did a week ago: are we doing everything we can today so that the new Lotmans will find Tartu University and no other place?” continued President Ilves. “Are the doors of our faculties open to the best students, including the best scientists in Estonia, who have given academic service in other universities and research institutions? The honest answer will be ... yes ... indeed, in some places.”

The head of state said that during the era of globalisation we must continue to keep in mind that our national university has the task of developing sciences in our native language and the Estonian science language with it, in all spheres, as this is aimed at ensuring the future of Estonia, and asked: “But why it seems so natural today that everything that claims to be science must be published in the English language?”

“Our place in the comparative picture of international universities and research institutions will be dependent, among other things, on whether we value ourselves, our researchers, our professors, and our national knowledge,” emphasised President Ilves.

“At the moment, Estonia is looking around, searching, and asking – how should we proceed now? This is the very same question that the Estonian educational system should ask itself. The president cannot answer the questions, which were raised today. This must be done by the universities, Estonia’s electorate, and those elected by us all,” said the head of state.

Full text of President Ilves’s speech can be found [here](#) .