

Honoured Rector,
Honorary Doctors and Doctors in spe,
respected academic family of Tartu University,
my ladies and gentlemen,
dear friends.

If I were to try to express the role and meaning of Tartu University in teaching our native language, it would, above all, become apparent in the ties between nationhood and education. The creation, validation and maintenance of these ties.

In recent decades, it has also been expressed in the new opening of our nation to the world, in bold comparison with the very best, establishing ambitious goals and, therefore, ongoing learning.

Today is the best day to ask directly:
who would we be?
and would we actually even be here?
if we did not have an Estonian-speaking Tartu University?

In the 20 years of Estonia's independence, Tartu University gave the best possible education to approximately 15,000 people. It was these people who kept us going, despite the big defeats, until we saw new light again.

The values and mentality conveyed by Jakob Hurt and carried on by these men and women who were born during the "Estonian" times remained Estonia's backbone, one that could not be broken by the occupation.

Tartu University remained the centre of mental resistance, a unique intellectual incubator, despite Soviet ignorance and persecution.

Tartu University has been the *Alma Mater* for the majority of those people who began to restore Estonia's independence twenty years ago. Once the time was right, they went from here to re-build the state of Estonia.

Therefore, we can conclude that we exist as a cultural nation and a country and have more than the average success of a country on a global scale because we have Tartu University. This is not party talk. This is a fact.

No university, no state is born out of the blue, although sometimes we consider them as the beginning of everything. Both the state and university are, above all, created by people.

Mr. Jaan Poska, Mr. Konstantin Päts and Mr. Jaan Tõnisson together with many other builders and creators of the state of Estonia are the honourable alumni of Tartu University. But their Tartu University was not an Estonian-speaking university.

Many other designers and builders of the state of Estonia came from other acknowledged

universities of their time: the leading diplomat, Mr. Ants Piip from St. Petersburg; the statesman and scholar, Mr. Gustav Suits from Helsinki, and the chairman of the Estonian country administration, Mr. Jaan Raamot from Königsberg.

We probably would never have become independent, and, what is even more important is that we would never have been able to build up a working state, had we not the generation of Estonians with university degrees.

They received their education from many universities, Tartu included. In many languages, the Estonian language included. However, the best education they could get at that time – this is what is important.

Today, more than one hundred years later, the centre has remained the same. Our own country has added a hint of idealism: we want to give our young people the best higher education of our time in Tartu University and in the Estonian language.

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 cannot afford to rest on the laurels of our predecessors. We are responsible for finding answers to today's questions.

And these, we have to admit, differ considerably from the questions asked 90 years ago. Also, the surrounding environment is different – a globalised world and a globalised Estonia, where every door opens in every direction.

How should we ensure the survival of the Estonian nation, learning, and culture in these conditions? Which role should be fulfilled by the national university of the Republic of Estonia, our own *Universitas Tartuensis*?

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?

The number of young people who aspire to enter universities will drop considerably in the years to come. Budgeting opportunities will be narrower, more than we could have expected and experienced a short while ago.

At the same time, our higher education landscape is unreasonably fragmented and characterised by ruthless competition and outmanoeuvring in the fight for diminishing resources.

The size of Estonia should inspire us to be innovative, expedient and definitely use an individual approach.

Considering the surrounding reality and future goals, decisions of questionable merit have been adopted on a political level nationally and on an academic level in universities.

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 specialties and winners of international Olympiads continue their education in some other university.

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.

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.

All this does not apply to students only. 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?

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.

During the era of globalisation, we must continue to keep the following in mind: our national university has the task of developing sciences in our native language and the Estonian science language with it. In all spheres.

This work is directly aimed at ensuring the future of Estonia.

However, we do know that according to the system of research and development, many publications, including some published by the publishing house of Tartu University itself, which mostly include books and articles in the Estonian language, are considered to lack the sign of quality. As a consequence, these works are basically non-existent. They will not be taken into consideration in the complicated and competitive process of applying for grants and degrees.

We despised, for a reason, the past when doctorate papers on Estonian linguistics were written and defended in the Russian language. 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.

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.

From the very depth of my heart, I congratulate our national university on its 90th anniversary. Its service to the Estonian state and people are absolutely unique, as I have already mentioned.

But worries for the future and the strong health of the jubilarian are also definitely appropriate. Therefore, it would be justified to direct birthday wishes towards the future: May you use the next ten years in such a way that when celebrating this institution's 100th anniversary ten years from now, the best answers to today's questions will have been realised.

These questions must be answered by Tartu University alone. The future of Tartu University is in the hands of our state and our people.

But these answers have one and only recipient. The very same for whom the university was established 90 years ago through the medium of the Estonian language.

The recipient is the people of Estonia.

Thank you.