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Linguistic Accessibility of the Study Environment of the University of Vaasa

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ABSTRACT:

Globalization, marketization of higher education, and the European ambitions for a common higher education area have driven Finnish universities to internationalize at an increasing pace since the 1990s. This trend has been followed by another: the English language has attained a strong position alongside the national language(s) in universities. As the language practices within the study environments have changed, there is an increased need for universities to rethink their language planning and policies to ensure all students an equal opportunity to operate in the university environments. For Finnish universities, the promotion of equality is also an obligation set by the Non-Discrimination Act. In this thesis, I examine linguistic accessibility of the study environment of the University of Vaasa from the perspective of the English language. I analyze how the University of Vaasa considers the requirements of the increased internationality in its policy and strategy documents and what kind of measures are taken to ensure the accessibility of the study environment for the international degree students. To understand how these policies translate into practice, I surveyed international degree students and examine their experiences of language barriers within the study environment. Based on the analysis of the case organization and the documents guiding its language use, I found that there is misalignment between the different documents. On a policy level, the University is actively promoting both the equal opportunity for all students to operate in the study environment and the use of English as an equal language alongside Finnish. However, at the same time English is often regarded as needed only when the activities are perceived relevant for international target audiences. The experiences of the international degree students indicate that in practice the perceived relevancy of activities may differ from the actual needs and interests of international degree students. To improve the linguistic accessibility of the study environment from the perspective of English language, I found that there is a need to align language guidelines with the equality goals.

KEYWORDS: Accessibility, Higher Education, Internationalization, Language Planning and Policy, Linguistic Accessibility, Linguistic Diversity

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Globalisaatio, korkeakoulutuksen kaupallistuminen ja yhteiseurooppalaiset tavoitteet jaetusta korkeakoulutusalueesta ovat toimineet vahvoina motivaattoreina suomalaisten yliopistojen kansainvälistymiselle 1990-luvulta alkaen. Kansainvälistymistrendiä on seurannut toinen korkeakoulujen arjessa näkyvä muutos: englannin kieli on saavuttanut korkeakouluissa vahvan aseman kansalliskielten rinnalla. Opiskelu- ja ympäristöjen kielikäytänteiden muuttuessa on korkeakoulujen kiinnitettävä aiempaa enemmän huomiota kielisuunnitteluunsa ja -politiikkaansa varmistukseksi kaikille opiskelijoille yhtäläiset mahdollisuudet toimia opiskelu- ja ympäristöissä. Suomalaisille yliopistoille opiskelijoiden tasa-arvon edistäminen on myös yhdenvertaisuuslain määräämä velvoite. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen Vaasan yliopiston opiskelu- ja ympäristön kielellistä saavutettavuutta englannin kielen näkökulmasta. Analysoin, miten Vaasan yliopisto ottaa huomioon lisääntyneen kansainvälisyyden vaatimukset sen keskeisimmissä kielikäytänteitä ohjaavissa dokumenteissa ja millaisia keinoja näissä esitetään opiskelu- ja ympäristön saavutettavuuden takaamiseksi kansainvälisille opiskelijoille. Ymmärtääkseni paremmin, miten nämä linjaukset ja tavoitteet konkretisoituvat käytänteisiin, tein kyselytutkimuksen yliopiston kansainvälisille tutkinto-opiskelijoille. Tässä tarkastelin heidän kokemuksiaan kielellisistä esteistä opiskelu- ja ympäristössä. Tutkielmassani havaitsin, että yliopiston kielikäytänteitä ohjaavat dokumentit eivät ole yhtenäisessä linjassa keskenään. Toisaalta yliopisto pyrkii aktiivisesti edistämään sekä opiskelijoiden tasa-arvoa että englannin kielen käyttöä rinnakkain suomen kielen kanssa. Toisaalta samanaikaisesti yliopiston dokumenteissa englannin kielen käyttäminen usein nähdään tarpeelliseksi vain, mikäli toiminnan kohdeyleisö koetaan kansainväliseksi. Kyselytutkimuksessa tarkastelemieni kansainvälisten tutkinto-opiskelijoiden kokemukset osoittivat, että toiminnan koettu tärkeys voi poiketa kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden todellisista tarpeista ja kiinnostuksista. Tutkielmani tulokset osoittavat, että opiskelu- ja ympäristön saavutettavuuden parantamiseksi englannin kielen näkökulmasta tulisi yliopiston yhdenmukaistaa sen kielilinjaukset sen tasa-arvotavoitteiden kanssa.

AVAINSANAT: Esteettömyys, kansainvälistyminen, kielellinen monimuotoisuus, kielellinen saavutettavuus, kielisuunnittelu, kielipolitiikka, korkeakoulutus, saavutettavuus

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1 Introduction

In higher education, internationalization has been a global trend changing the education arena for the past three decades (Knight 2013: 3). Integrating an international, intercultural, or a global dimension into all functions has become a commonly valued ambition for higher education institutions (Knight 2004: 2). In the context of European higher education, another trend has accompanied internationalization: English language gaining grounds as an academic lingua franca. Many universities have adopted English alongside the national language(s) as a language of science, instruction, and administration (Soler et al. 2018: 2). This development has been promoted by both economic and social drivers. The use of English may provide universities economic value through attracting more fee-paying students, the benefits from sharing resources and knowledge across national borders and qualifying them for more funding (Liddicoat 2016: 4). It also allows universities to broaden their reach, gain more visibility, and increase the impact of their work (Cots et al. 2014).

Inevitably, in countries where English is not the dominant language of public communication, this has led to the linguistic environments of higher education institutions becoming increasingly linguistically diverse (Liddicoat 1 – 3). Finland is one of the countries where the linguistic repertoires of universities have changed significantly as a by-product of their internationalization efforts. The internationalization of Finnish higher education began in the 1980s. While at first the focus was on the promotion of staff and student mobility programs, nowadays internationality is deeply ingrained into all areas of university operations (Saarinen 2012: 6). As universities have become more international, English has become increasingly common of use across all their activities (Clarke 2020: 168)

Even though English language has become prominent in Finnish universities, it does not have a similar official status as the national languages. Finland is a constitutionally bilingual country with two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, that have traditionally been used separately in institutional settings (Kuteeva et al. 2020: 4). As per the Universities Act, the central legislative

framework governing all university activity in Finland, the majority of the fifteen public universities in Finland are officially monolingual. Nine universities are monolingual with Finnish, two monolingual with Swedish and four are bilingual with Finnish and Swedish (Finlex 2020F). The role of English language is left vague in the national legislation. The Universities Act states that universities are allowed to use other additional languages in their operations, but it does not bind them to do so.

In practice, Finnish universities are nowadays often bi- or multilingual organizations in which two or more languages are used (Soler-Carbonell et al. 2017: 6). Nevertheless, the use of English as a language of tuition or administration for universities is not set by national language legislation, but more a by-product of the international-minded strategy-making of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the universities themselves. The lack of clearly defined national-level guidelines for the use of English leaves universities with a greater responsibility over managing language use on an organizational level.

It can be argued that if a university chooses to use an additional language besides the national language(s) required by the Universities Act, it must ensure equal access to its services all languages used in its key operations. Equal access to communication and services is a prerequisite for creating an inclusive environment and should be regarded as a goal of language policy and planning efforts of universities (Shore et al. 2011: 7; Berthoud et al. 2013: 374). For Finnish universities, the promotion of equality is also an institutional duty set by the Non-Discrimination Act (Finlex 2014). To ensure all students an equal opportunity to operate in the internationalized study environments, universities must pay attention to the accessibility of their environment, services, and communication also from a language perspective.

1.1 Research questions and aims

In this thesis, I will utilize insights from both accessibility research and language planning and policy research to examine linguistic accessibility at the University of Vaasa. The aim of this thesis

is first to assess how the University of Vaasa considers the role of the English language in its language policy and strategy documents. I will explore what kind of organizational-level measures are taken in order to ensure accessibility of the study environment in English. To better understand how these policies reflect into language practices, I will investigate the experiences of international degree students. I will explore how the degree students who use English within the study environment experience the linguistic accessibility – have they experienced any language-related issues and if yes, in which context these issues arose?

The University of Vaasa was chosen as the main focus of this study mainly because of the rather special combination of aspects influencing its language use. The University of Vaasa is a multidisciplinary university with approximately 5,000 enrolled students (University of Vaasa 2020F). By the Finnish law, the University of Vaasa is a monolingual university. According to the Universities Act, both the language of instruction and degrees and the language of administration is Finnish (Finlex 2020F). However, the University is located in a traditionally bilingual area on the western coast of Finland.

The city of Vaasa is both officially and genuinely bilingual with a Finnish majority and a notable Swedish minority, with almost a quarter of the city's residents being native Swedish speakers. The city of Vaasa is becoming more linguistically diverse with currently around 9% of the inhabitants speaking languages other than the national languages as their native, but the bilingual Finnish-Swedish practices remain strong in the area (City of Vaasa 2020). Following the fact that Swedish is an official language of Finland alongside Finnish and that the Vaasa area has traditionally had a strong bilingual profile, Swedish language has played a special role in the language use of the University of Vaasa. Continually, the University of Vaasa is closely cooperating with both public and private organizations in the area. Therefore, the University must consider the importance of Swedish language in its activities, especially in external communication and stakeholder collaboration (University of Vaasa, 2019). In the past, the University has also offered Swedish-taught degree programs (University of Vaasa 2010).

In addition, as an organization the University of Vaasa has strongly strived to become more international in the past two decades. This strategic focus on internationality penetrates all areas of the university's operations, but especially in teaching and research. The University started to offer international degree programs in 2005 and the number of these programs has steadily increased since then. For research, the degree of internationalization itself is one of the key monitoring targets for developing the research activities and in general international cooperation is regarded strategically important (University of Vaasa 2016). Following from this, the study environment has become culturally more diverse and the linguistic landscape has changed rapidly. Especially the English language has quickly become of importance in all areas of the University's operations.

1.2 Previous research

In the context of higher education, there is a great deal of previous research conducted on internationalization (e.g. Knight 2004; Soler-Carbonell & Gallego-Balsá 2016), bi- and multilingual practices (e.g. Veronesi & Nickenig 2007; Kuteeva et al. 2020) as well as language planning and policy (e.g. Cots et al. 2014; Hult & Källkvist 2016). Interestingly, also the languages practices of the University of Vaasa have been recently noted in research, as Järnlström et al. (2020: 293–322) explore in their case study the University staff's experiences of misfit between a person's language skills and the language practices of their work environment. They identify reasons behind the perceived lack of fit between these two, referred to as language misfit, using a mixed-methods approach. While language-related issues are explored in this study, the focus of the study is on the University's staff members and the experiences of student are not examined. This thesis provides complementary insights into the case organization as a study environment and draws attention to its linguistic accessibility from the perspective of international degree students.

Furthermore, this thesis aims to further bring together two fields that are closely connected but which have been in previous research rarely discussed together. The importance of language as a potential creator or decreaser of organizational barriers has been noted in past research, also in the context of higher education organizations (e.g. Doiz et al. 2012). Accessibility and inclusion

questions have also gained more attention in the recent years (e.g. Rydeman et al. 2018, Jucevičienė et al. 2018). However, the past accessibility research in the context of higher education has mainly focused on students with disabilities or web accessibility questions. Accessibility in the study environment from a language perspective, or linguistic accessibility, has not been problematized much. In the past years, a few studies focusing outside of the scope of higher education have provided a foundation for an academic dialogue on the topic. For instance, Schuster et al. (2017) in their study discuss the accessibility of signage in hospitals and argue that organizations must ensure accessibility to information for people consuming their services. As internationalization has rapidly changed the linguistic landscapes of Finnish universities, there is a growing need to discuss the accessibility of the studying environments from a language perspective within this context.

1.3 Material and methodology

In order to answer the research questions and to reach the objectives of this thesis, a qualitative case study methodology was chosen. The descriptive nature of qualitative research fits the thesis objectives well, as the aim of this thesis is to describe, interpret and understand a phenomenon. Case study as a research method allows an in-depth exploration of complex issues and it is a tool used widely in social sciences. There are several advantages of doing a case study. First, when conducting a case study, the examination of the research questions is set within the real-world context. Consequently, case studies consider not only the case itself but also the context and the interaction between these two. Second, in case studies both quantitative and qualitative methods may be used for the data analysis and the choice can be made based on the research objectives. Third, case studies often produce detailed accounts of complex real-life situations that could not be captured through other methods (Yin 2013).

Case study as a research method is the best suited when the aim is to describe and explore a phenomenon. Case studies are commonly used in research not only as an exploratory tool, but also when dealing with real-life situations connected to social issues and problems (Zainal 2007:

5). As case studies are widely regarded as an applicable tool when examining micro level data, I found the method suitable for this thesis. In this thesis, I will use a single-case design to explore linguistic accessibility at the University of Vaasa. The aim of this thesis is not to make generalizing conclusions, but instead to explore the research questions in the context of the case organization.

The theoretical framework of this thesis will be formed around accessibility and language planning and policy research. The material that will be analyzed in the case study in chapter five, consists of two different types of data. First, policy documents and strategic plans of the University of Vaasa were gathered to examine how the English language is viewed in these official documents. A total of 8 relevant documents were chosen for the analysis. These are listed in the table below. In case of documents that were only available in Finnish, a translated document title is listed first and the original Finnish title is provided in brackets.

<i>Document</i>	<i>Year of production</i>	<i>Length in words</i>	<i>Language(s) in which document is available</i>
Accessibility Plan (<i>Esteettömyyssuunnitelma</i>)	2008	4472	Finnish
Degree Regulations	2015	3411	Finnish, English
Equality Plan	2017	4749	Finnish, English
Language Policy (<i>Kielilinjaukset</i>)	2010	814	Finnish
Policy for the Use of Finnish and English	2019	1036	Finnish, English
Rules of Conduct (<i>Järjestyssääntö</i>)	2017	983	Finnish
Strategy 2017 – 2020	2016	1289	Finnish, English
University Regulations	2017	5777	Finnish, English

Table 1. Policy and strategy documents analyzed

These policy documents include the key documents regulating the University's activities, language-specific guidelines, the University strategy, as well as accessibility and equality documents. All except for one, the documents were fetched from the University website and they are all publicly available. The only exception is the Policy for the Use of Finnish and English, which was fetched from the University's internal portal Navi, which is accessible for the students and staff

members of the University of Vaasa. On the University's website, the Rector's decision on the Policy for the Use of Finnish and English is available in Finnish. At the time of writing this, the content in this Rector's decision document was identical to the content on the internal portal (University of Vaasa 2019, Navi 2020). However, as the Policy for the Use of Finnish and English on the internal portal is available in both Finnish and English and the information should be the most up-to-date, I chose to analyze this.

To examine how international degree students experience the linguistic accessibility of the study environment, I conducted a survey for the international degree students at the University of Vaasa. The online survey was shared on Facebook in a closed group of approximately 230 international students in January 2018 and survey answers were accepted until March 2018. The response for the survey was 7.4% and a total of 17 qualified survey responses were received. Only responses from international degree students who mainly use English within the study environment were qualified. In addition to the students using languages other than English in the study environment, I chose to exclude also exchange students, since exchange students are exposed to the university environment for a shorter time and their needs usually differ from those of degree students. For example, international degree students may be interested in learning about exchange opportunities in other countries, whereas for exchange students this information is naturally less relevant.

With the number of qualified responses received, the response rate for the survey can be considered to be low. However, as repetitive themes could be identified from the answers received, the survey provided enough data for the purposes of this thesis. Moreover, surveys regarding similar themes conducted by the University of Vaasa have had similar response rates in the past. For example, the 2016 equality survey had a response rate of 5,4% (University of Vaasa, 2017).

In my analysis, I utilize qualitative content analysis. This method is based on systemic classification process of coding and identifying themes from the material through interpretation of the content. While interpretation of the data this way is subjective, the method allows for pattern recognition

and helps to build an approximate image of the reality even with limited data (Soler et al 2017: 7). In the analysis of policy and strategy documents, I focused on explicit mentions relating to language use and/or accessibility and identifying potential repeating themes across the different types of documents. In the analysis of survey results, I focused on analyzing responses the two most relevant survey questions “Have you ever come across language-related problems around the campus?” and the following open-ended question “If yes, please describe the problem situation(s) shortly”.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

After the general introduction provided in this chapter, I will present the context of this study in more detail in the second chapter. I will discuss the internationalization trend of higher education and its impact on language use in universities first in the scope of Finnish higher education and then focusing on the case organization only. In the third chapter, I will first define language planning and policy and then discuss the external influences on the language planning and policy of universities and how universities themselves can and do manage their language use. In the fourth chapter, I will deep-dive into the concept of accessibility. I will review some earlier definitions of accessibility and discuss accessibility work in universities. I will also expand more on the term linguistic accessibility and the connection between accessibility and language planning and policy work.

On the basis of the theoretical framework built through these chapters, I will move onto examining the linguistic accessibility of the University of Vaasa in the fifth chapter. In this chapter, I will present the findings of my analysis of the policy documents and strategic plans and the results of the survey I conducted. Finally, in the sixth chapter, I will present the conclusions of this study. In this last chapter, I will also discuss the limitations of this thesis and possible future directions for research.

2 The changing linguistic landscape of Finnish higher education

Traditionally, the majority of the public universities in Finland have been monolingual institutions. The country's constitutional bilingualism is reflected in the languages used, but the individual universities have been linguistically quite homogenous. The linguistic situation of Finnish higher education has been described using the term parallel monolingualism, referring to the use of two languages separately (Saarinen 2020: 93). Since the 1990s, the rapid internationalization of higher education has increased linguistic diversity in Finnish universities – mainly through English gaining ground alongside the national languages. In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of the internationalization of higher education in Finland and its impact on language use in universities. Following this, I will discuss the internationalization of the University of Vaasa and linguistic diversity in the context of the case organization.

2.1 Internationalization of the Finnish higher education

Internationalization refers to the process of strengthening the relationship between two or more nations (Bull 2012: 16–17). While higher education has traditionally been regarded as international by nature, the recent internationalization trend is unparalleled in the past. By incorporating internationality into their functions, universities aim to ensure their competitiveness both locally and internationally and to attract the best talent (Kuteeva et al. 2020:2). In Finland, the internationalization of higher education began in the 1980s and continued at an increasing pace after Finland joined the European Union in 1995 (Saarinen 2012: 5-6). The Bologna Declaration, which officially started the process aiming at creating a common European higher education area, was signed in 1999 by 29 European Ministers of Education (Voegtler, Knill & Dobbins 2011: 3). Finland as a signatory party committed to common goals, and changes were made to national higher education policy to implement the objectives (Nokkala 2007: 29).

For Finnish universities, there were several motivators for implementing internationality into their activities. Firstly, there was the economic motivator as being aligned with national higher

education policy goals provided access to more funding. The main driver however was globalization and the following marketization of higher education. Being international was viewed as a prerequisite for universities to be able to cooperate across national borders and to benefit from the knowledge and technology sharing. It was also seen as a way to attract more talent (students, researchers, and staff) and to provide them with skills needed to navigate the globalized working life. As higher education was increasingly seen as a commodity, there was more competition. Integrating internationality was first seen as a competitive advantage, but it quickly became a must for universities to be able to stay competitive both locally and internationally (Saarinen 2020: 90; Nokkala 2007: 29).

At first, the focus was on international staff and student mobility programs, that were regarded as a practical way of responding to the new economic and educational needs. In the early 2000s, universities also started to systematically develop international degree programs that would attract new students from other countries to Finnish universities (CIMO 2009: 4 – 5). According to the data of Vipunen, a statistics portal maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education, the share of non-Finnish nationals studying in Finnish universities has increased slow but steady throughout the past twenty years. This development can be seen in the graph below:

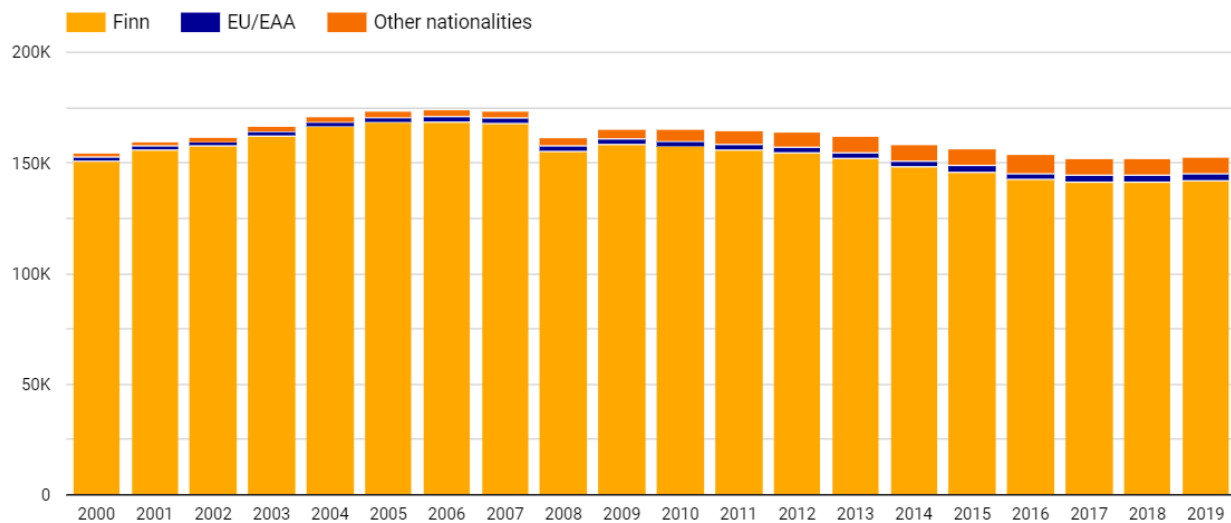


Figure 1. Finnish university students and their nationalities 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

The increase in the share of international students can be seen even clearer if we just look at the development of nationality shares among university students in Finland:

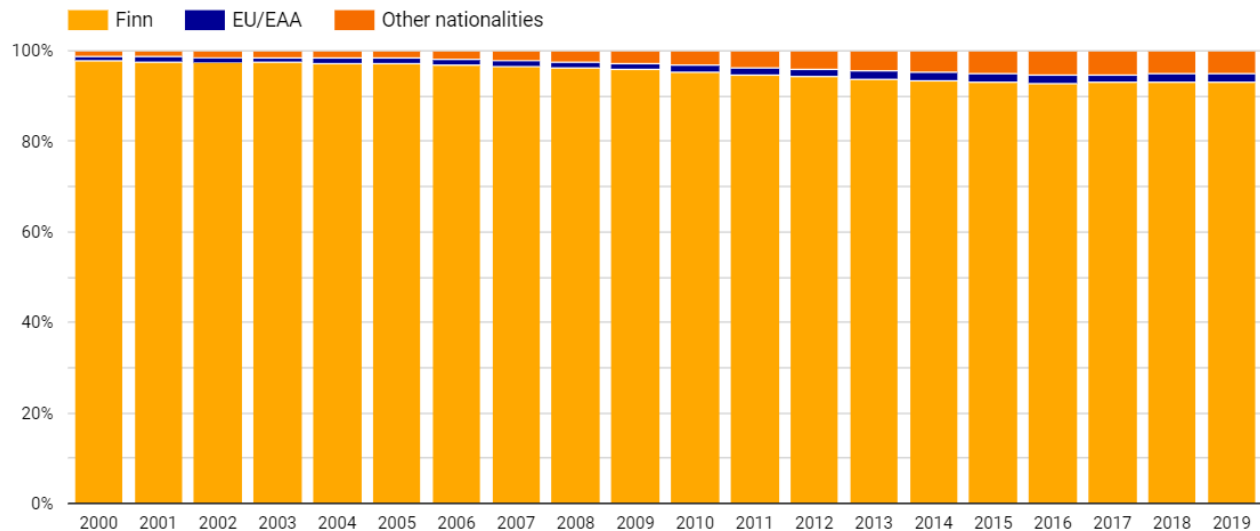


Figure 2. Nationality shares of university students in Finland 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

In 2017, mandatory tuition fees for non-EU and non-EAA students came into force with the implemented changes to the Universities Act (Finlex 2020F). An immediate dip in the number of applicants resulted and the number of new students decreased in 2017. However, the share of international students in universities was not impacted noticeably. Also, the number of international applications bounced back and beyond already in the following year. New record heights were reached already again in 2018 and 2019. In 2019, the number of international applications was 25% higher than in 2016, the year before the introduction of the mandatory tuition fees for non-EU and non-EAA students (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019: 4).

The emerging trend in the Finnish higher education institutions has been embedding internationalization as a part of the core actions. The trend has been further promoted by national level actors. For instance, in 2017 the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture published new guidelines for the promotion of internationalization of Finnish higher education. The proposed implementation plan outlines seven action points on national level that aims at improving the quality

of education through the promotion of internationalization. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Culture proposes that all Finnish universities should draw up clear goals for international activities and draft an action plan to achieve these goals (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). The majority of public universities in Finland have already incorporated internationalization into their strategic plans as a key component (e.g. Tampere University 2020; Helsinki University 2020; Åbo Akademi University 2020). It seems that nowadays the universities share an understanding of the importance of the readiness and ability to both cooperate and compete on a global level and internationality seems to be regarded by universities almost as self-evident part of their operations.

2.2 International English and linguistic diversity

The English language has played an important part in the internationalization of Finnish higher education. From the start, it was recognized that using foreign languages would be a necessary part of becoming more international. One reason for this was that requiring knowledge of the national language(s) posed a barrier of entry to talent (Saarinen & Nikula 2012: 146). Neither Finnish nor Swedish are big global languages and requiring the knowledge of these languages deterred potential talents. In the 1990s, universities experimented with French, English, and German. However, English quickly became the standard (Clarke 2020: 168). The role of English language has often been regarded as an enabler. For example, Saarinen & Nikula (2012) discuss in their paper the policies and practices of international degree programmes in Finnish higher education and argue that the English languages play an important role in enabling universities to work towards their internationalization ambitions (Saarinen & Nikula 2012: 146).

As universities have incorporated English into teaching, administration, and communication as a part of their internationalization efforts, English has established a strong position alongside the national languages in universities (Saarinen 2020: 85). While the English language has been recognized as a potential threat to the national languages, economic drivers and the wish to be more connected with the rest of the world have urged for the use of English in universities nevertheless

(Saarinen 2020: 90). However, incorporating a foreign language alongside the national language(s) in higher education has not come without challenges. In 2009, CIMO noted in their report that even though international degree programs were regarded as strategically important, the university administrations often operated in national languages on the terms of domestic students (CIMO 2009: 83). While the linguistic repertoires of Finnish universities have broadened to incorporate English in all areas of university operations, the use of the national language(s) and English is not necessarily equal. According to Medvedeva (2018: 94–95) there is a hidden juxtaposition of languages in Finnish higher education. She argues that the use of national language(s) and English in universities is not equivalent and that the provisions in different languages are hard to compare (Medvedeva 2018: 185).

Yet, the increased use of English is also a step towards the desired goal of truly international higher education. With English now more often as the working language and the language of tuition, Finnish universities have a broader impact and they are able to attract talent also from outside of the national borders. The use of lingua franca also makes it easier to share knowledge and resources and to reach a wider range of people who are potentially interested in the work done at the universities. This development is also in the interest of local students and researchers, for whom the use of English is nowadays often a requirement to be able to take part of the science community and to operate in the globalized working life.

2.3 Internationalization of the University of Vaasa

The University of Vaasa started its first systematic internationalization efforts in the 1980s. At first, the focus was strengthening Nordic cooperation. In 1984, the University of Vaasa alongside of two other Finnish universities signed a contract with Umeå University to increase cooperation. In 1989, the University signed Nordplus exchange agreements with four more universities located in Sweden and Denmark (University of Vaasa 2020A). At the beginning of the 1990s, the University also started to admit foreign degree students. However, the courses were still mainly taught

in Finnish and the number of international students stayed modest throughout the decade (University of Vaasa 2020B). At the turn of the new millennium, the University of Vaasa began to truly extend its internationalization efforts beyond the Nordic countries. In 2005, the first international, English-taught master's degree programs were launched. This led to an immediate and notable growth of the number of international degree students (University of Vaasa 2020C).

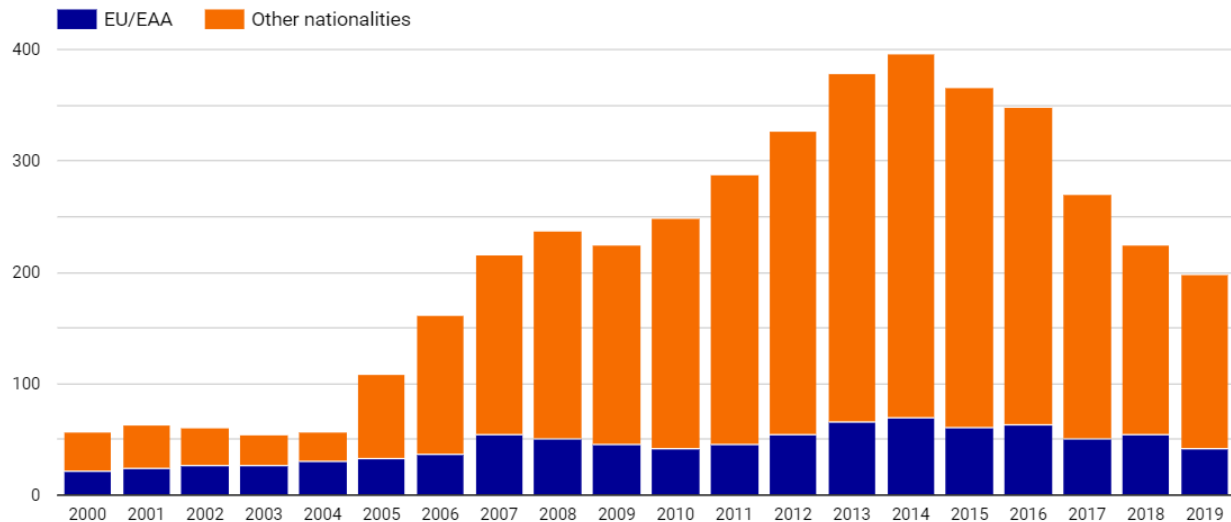


Figure 2. International students at the University of Vaasa 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

As seen in above in Figure 2, the number of international degree student continued to increase slowly but steadily in the years following from 2005. The highpoint was reached in 2014, after which there has been a downward trend. However, the number of international students still today remains notably higher than what it was at the beginning of 00s. In year 2000, there were a total of 57 international students and in 2019 the total number of international students was 198.

To get a better understanding of the number of international students in relation to the total student population within the University of Vaasa, we can take a look at the nationality shares. The development of the nationality shares within the population of the University can be seen on the following page in Figure 3.

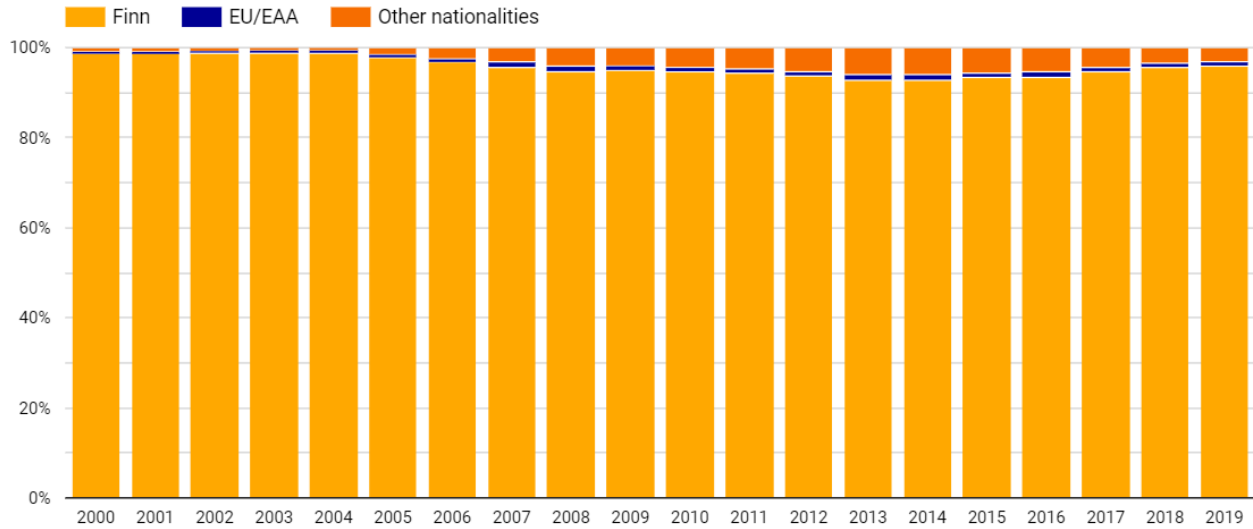


Figure 3. Nationalities of students at the University of Vaasa 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

As shown in the graph above, after the rapid growth between 2005 and 2010, the share of international student remained quite stably between 6 and 7 per cent of the total student body up until 2016. In Autumn 2017, also at the University of Vaasa tuition fees were introduced for all new non-EU and non-EAA national students. While on a national level the introduction of tuition fees did not lead to a drastic change in the share of international degree students, at the University of Vaasa a decrease can be noted starting from 2017 and continuing into the following years. Another potential explanation for the decreased share of international students is that in 2017 the University of Vaasa moved its language degree studies to the University of Jyväskylä. In 2019, around 4% of the degree students were international. It remains to be seen if the share of international students will bounce back in the next years.

In any case, being global remains a key strategic focus area for the University. For example, the 2017–2020 strategy of the University of Vaasa portrays internationality as one cornerstone of its operations by setting as a goal to be “a business-oriented, multidisciplinary, international university” (University of Vaasa 2016: 4). In the document, internationality is mentioned frequently: education and research should be of high international standard, for research the degree of in-

ternationalization is an important performance metric, and international mobility of both students and staff is promoted (University of Vaasa). The internationalization goals are visible in the everyday operations of the University. For instance, the University has also strengthened its international recruitment and now nearly a third of the teaching and research staff come outside of Finland (University of Vaasa 2020E)

2.4 Linguistic diversity at the University of Vaasa

Internationalization has had a strong impact on language use at the University of Vaasa. Although the official language of both teaching and degrees and administration is Finnish, in practice the working languages at the University are nowadays Finnish and English (Järnlström et al. 2020: 302). Throughout the history of the University, Swedish language has been used to some measure in its operations: the University has offered Swedish-taught degree programs in the past, Swedish is continuously important for regional collaboration and the Academic Library Tritonia operates in Finnish, English and Swedish. Yet, as the English language has become more commonly used in different areas of the University's operations, at the same time the Swedish language seems to become less visible. For example, currently the University does not offer any Swedish-taught degree programs even though it has done so in the past (University of Vaasa 2020G). Moreover, there seems to be a strategy shift from promoting multilingualism towards the promotion of parallel use of Finnish and English (University of Vaasa 2010, University of Vaasa 2019).

It could be argued that the study environment has not necessarily become linguistically that much more diverse. However, traditionally the Finnish language has been clearly dominant in the language use of the University. Only the recent development of increasing use of English has begun to reduce this dominance. Currently, of the 26 degree programs offered, seven are international degree programs with English as the language of tuition.¹ All the English-taught degree programs

¹ Ending programs not included in this number. Language education for degrees at the University of Vaasa was moved to the University of Jyväskylä on 1 August 2017.

offered are master's level programs and they make up for 30% of all the master's level programs at the University (University of Vaasa 2020G).

The number of students speaking other languages than the national languages has also increased compared to the beginning of 00s. Whereas in 2000, 72 students spoke as their native language other language than Finnish or Swedish, in 2019 the number was 324 (Vipunen 2020A). This development can be seen in the graph below:

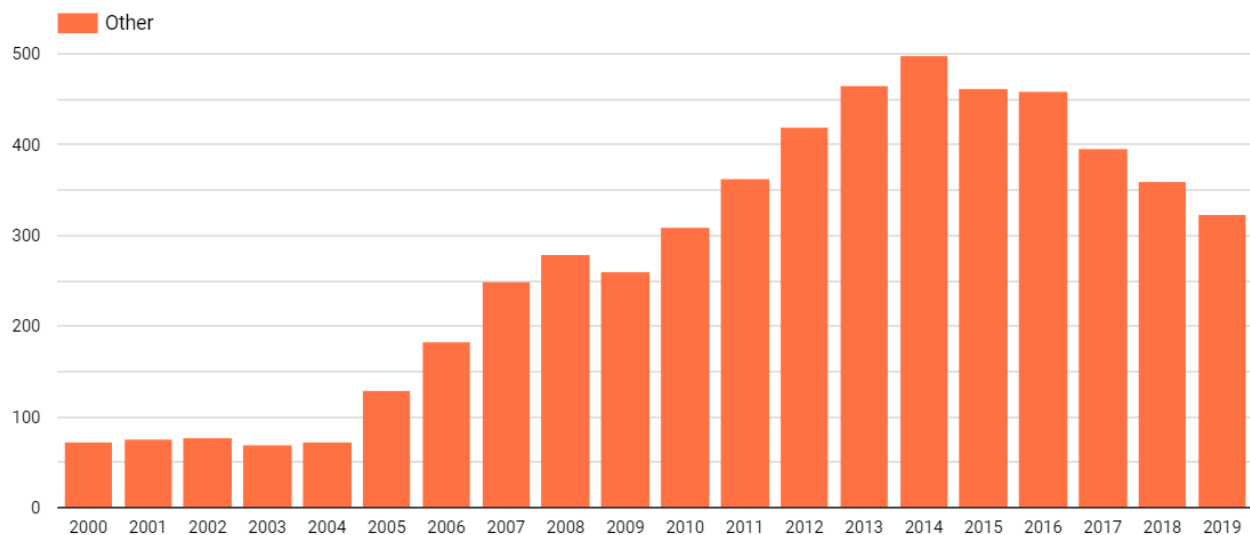


Figure 4. Foreign-native students at the University of Vaasa 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

Only a portion of this growth can be explained with the slight increase in the number of Finnish students with immigration background entering higher education (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2019). Mainly this is the result of increased number of international students. As noted earlier, after 2017 the number of international degree students has decreased, and this is also reflected in the decreased number of foreign-native students in the past couple of years.

Following that the University of Vaasa does not require from student in international programs knowledge of Finnish but only English skills, we can gather that the majority of the foreign-language speakers mainly use English in the University environment. The results of the survey done for this thesis supports this: all international degree students who responded to the survey stated

English as their main language in the study environment. While English has become more common in use at the University of Vaasa and the main communicative language in the study environment for a notable number of students, it still remains a minority language within this context. The clear majority of the student body are Finnish-natives, as seen in Figure 5 below.

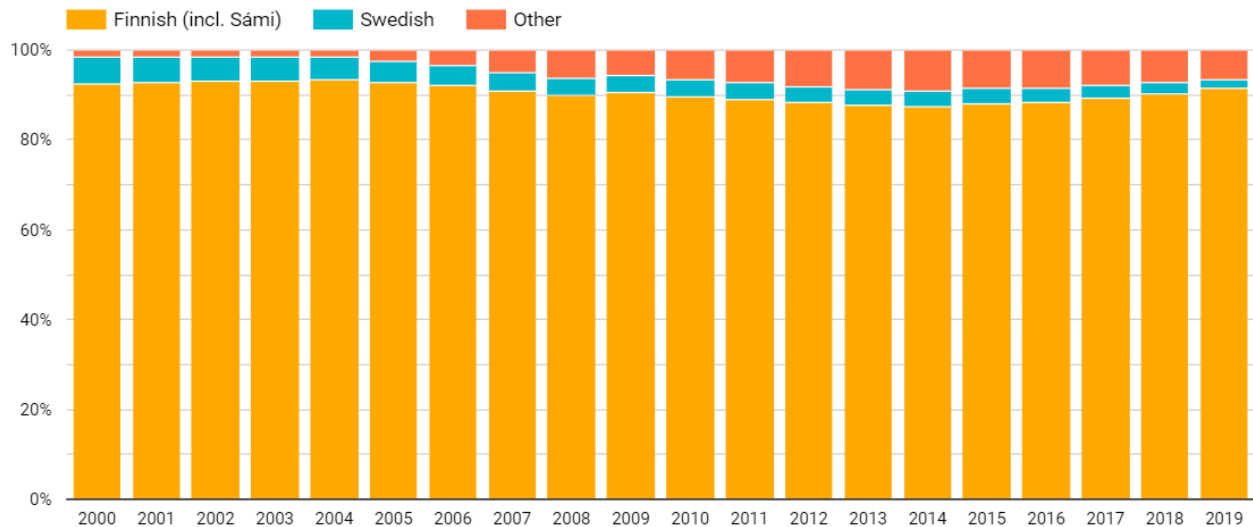


Figure 5. First languages of students at the University of Vaasa 2000-2019 (Vipunen 2020A)

For the majority of the students, English in the study environment is the language of internationalization and an additional language to use in order to gain skills needed in working life. For the local students, the study environment operates multilingually in languages they are to varying extents familiar with. All local students mandatorily must learn the other national language in primary, secondary, and higher education (Finlex 2020A-B, Finlex 2020D-F). Many of the local students can also access the areas of the study environment that operate in English as English is widely taught in the Finnish primary education and secondary education (Ministry of Education 2019, Vipunen 2020B). This has the potential to cause issues as for the international students the linguistic landscape of the University shows itself quite differently. From the perspective of international students who use English in the study environment, English is the only language that provides access to the it. The areas of the study environment that operate in the national languages are most often not accessible for international students.

3 Language planning and policy for Finnish universities

Managing language use in universities is a complex issue. There are economic and political social changes underlying the language issues (Liddicoat 2016: 5). The internationalization of higher education and the emerge of English as an academic lingua franca are both side products of a broader globalization trend. Since changes in language use are connected to wider social changes, examining them concerns more than one academic field (Bull 2012: 10 – 11). Furthermore, even language questions within individual universities cannot be discussed without taking the influence of external factors into account. While universities themselves can and must manage language use on local level, the limits and key objectives are set for them by external actors on a supranational and national level through legislation, guidelines, and strategies.

In this chapter, I will first define two key concepts connected to managing language use: language planning and policy. Following, I will discuss language planning and policy for universities on supranational, national and local level.

3.1 Defining language planning and policy

Language planning and policy (LPP) is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field, which combines linguistics, sociology, history, and political science (Ricento 2002: 13). In addition, it also entails elements of law and administrative science (Bastardas-Boada 2013:2). To capture the interconnectedness and dynamic nature of language planning and policy, some researchers use the term language management instead (E.g. Yanaprasart 2016). However, in the context of education, language planning and policy is more widely used expression in research.

Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: 6) define language policy as the ideas, laws, regulations, rules, and practices used to induce a planned change within a society, group, or a system. Spolsky (2004) gives language policy a three-part definition consisting of language beliefs, language manage-

ment and language practices. In his definition, language beliefs refer to the ideological views relating to which languages are suitable to be used in certain contexts, language management to all attempts to influence language use, and language practices to the actual language use. Language policy may also be defined as all forms of authority intervention, including non-intervention, aiming to regulate language use within a given political space (Berthoud et al. 2013: 60). For the purposes of this thesis, language policy will be understood as the regulatory tools used to influence language use within a certain context.

Language policy statements vary from formal types like national language legislation to more informal forms, but all language policies reflect the ideologies present in the context of the policy (Berthoud et al. 2013: 207). Karlsson & Karlsson (2020: 5) describe language policy documents as snapshots of the language ideologies within the domain they were produced in. Following that language policies are regarded as representations of language ideologies of a nation, an institution, or other domain, language policies also entail the question of power. While language planning and policy is fundamentally about managing language use within heterogeneous speaker groups, the goal of language planning and policy is not always to ensure that everyone has the possibility to take equally part of the communities and groups. It has been noted that language policies often support certain groups of people in maintaining or gaining economic, political, and/or social power (Clarke 2020: 169–170).

Language planning is the deliberate attempt to maintain, modify, change, and manage the linguistic behaviour of a societal context. Language planning is done on different levels ranging from supranational to national and local (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997: 4). In the context of Europe, supranational language planning mainly refers to EU-level and national level to language planning carried out by individual countries. Local language planning, for example the language planning work done in universities is affected by the language planning conducted on other levels. However, local level language planning does not necessarily echo the language planning objectives of other levels. In fact, local language planning may also resist, reformulate, and/or reimagine the national language planning objectives (Hult & Källkvist 2016: 6).

3.2 Supranational and national level influences

On a supranational level, language planning and policy work influencing language use in Finnish universities is mainly done on the EU-level. The European Union is linguistically diverse with 24 official languages and around 60 other languages spoken within the Union. For language policy statements geared towards higher education, the EU is a strong promoter of language learning and linguistic diversity. The key motives for promoting linguistic diversity on the European level are reducing the mobility barriers between the member states, facilitating communication across national borders, and increasing cooperation. The EU language policy does not mention any specific languages, but rather highlights the value of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Simultaneously, EU also strongly promotes the protection of the status of national languages in higher education (European Commission 2020a, European Commission 2020b). However, European institutions do not have power to decide upon the language policies of member states. Individual countries have freedom to decide upon how to implement the recommendations made (Lasagabaster 2015: 8).

The Nordic Council of Ministers, the main intergovernmental forum for co-operation in the Nordic region, also has an influence on the language use of Finnish universities. In 2006, the Declaration on a Nordic Language Policy was issued. This document called for parallel use of English alongside of the Nordic languages in research and education (Nordic Council of Ministers 2007). The concept of parallel language used here refers to simultaneously strengthening the role of English and maintaining and developing the position of national language(s) (Kuteeva 2014: 3). The Nordic Council of Minister has continued to push for the use of English alongside the national language(s) in the Nordics also more recently. In 2018, the Nordic Council of Ministers published a document detailing 11 best practice recommendations for implementing and promotion parallel language use in Nordic universities (Gregersen 2018).

Of external influences, national language legislation has a direct and binding impact on how universities manage their language use. Language legislation is a form of language policy, directed

by the government. Language legislation provides official recognition for the value of languages and governs the use of languages in a country. To an increasing extent, language issues are regarded as an essential element of human rights and equality legislation. Hence, language legislation is not limited to only language-specific acts (Williams 2013: 109).

The basis of language legislation in Finland is the constitution, which defines the status of the national languages. As mentioned earlier, Finland is constitutionally bilingual with Finnish and Swedish being the two official languages. Naturally, this is also reflected in the policies guiding language use in universities. The most impactful national policy influencing language use in Finnish universities is the Universities Act, which is the central legislative framework governing all university activity in Finland. This act defines both the administrative languages and languages of tuition and degrees for all public universities in Finland. Of the 15 universities, the administrative language is Finnish in all except three universities, where the administrative language is Swedish. The language of tuition and degrees is Finnish in nine universities, Swedish in two and bilingual Finnish-Swedish in two. Universities are allowed to use additional languages, but they are not bound to so by this act (Finlex 2020F).

The Universities Act also defines the language(s) used in the operations of student unions. All Finnish universities have an autonomous student union, which aims to serve as a link between its members and to promote the members' role in society. The main task of a student union is to prepare students for "active, conscious, and critical citizenship", and thus take part in one of the university's main educational tasks. All university students enrolled in Bachelor's or Master's degree studies are automatically members of the student union, including international degree students. However, by the Universities Act the student unions are only required to operate in the national language(s). The language of the student union is Finnish for the most universities. Exceptions are the student unions of Åbo Akademi University and Svenska Handelshögskolan which are operating in Swedish, as well as the bilingual student unions of University of Helsinki, University of Arts Helsinki, and Aalto University, in which both Finnish and Swedish is used (Finlex 2020F).

On a national level in universities, the use of foreign languages, especially English, is regarded as important and promoted through guidelines created by national institutions (e.g. Ministry of Education and Culture 2017: 60, 66). The promotion of foreign languages is mainly expressed as part of the internationalization guidelines and goals for universities (e.g. Ministry of Education of Culture 2009: 28 - 32). While in the documents the expression often used is the more vague term “foreign language”, in the Finnish context this is widely understood as a proxy for English (Kuteeva et al. 2020:110). Saarinen and Rontu (2018) state in their paper that in Finland the national language regulations for higher education have been gradually relaxed since the 1990s to give the universities more decision-making power over their language use. Only in the past couple of years, a shift in the opposite direction has been observed. Since English has gained such a strong position in Finnish higher education, there has been more discussions on the need to protect the national languages (Saarinen & Rontu 2018: 8-9).

3.3 Local language policy and planning in universities

Language planning and policy is necessary for organizations as it provides tools to manage diversity and promote cohesion. However, finding the perfect balance between these two can be challenging (Yanaprasart 2016: 13). In addition to the internal requirements for promoting diversity and cohesion in appropriate proportions, language planning and policy work is also influenced by external actors on supranational, national, and local level. The external influences also are not always aligned. Supranational and national level actors are on the one hand pushing Finnish universities to become more linguistically diverse and on the other hand they urge the universities to protect the position of the national languages. External actors also encourage the policy-making itself. In 2007, the Ministry of Education urged all Finnish universities to formulate their own language strategy by the end of 2009. By 2014, 12 of the total 14 public universities operating then had acted on this and had an own language policy (Saarinen & Talas 2017: 7). In 2018, also the Nordic Council of Ministers gave a recommendation that all universities in the Nordics should

have a publicly accessible language policy document that describes the principles of language use within a university (Nordic Council of Ministers 2018).

The main motives universities themselves give for language planning and the creation of language policy documents repeat across the documents from different universities. The key the reasons for language policies mentioned are ensuring that the language and communication methods are understandable, securing the position of the national language(s), supporting internationalization, and promoting bi- or multilingualism (University of Helsinki 2014, University of Turku 2016, Aalto University 2020).

A still topical challenge for Finnish universities is finding a balance between promoting internationalization through the use of English and securing the status of national languages (Saarinen 2018). Until early 2000s, the use of English language was not problematized much in universities due to its importance as a lingua franca in higher education. As English has become increasingly visible in the study environments, the language ideological debates in Finnish higher education have turned to question the role of English (Kuteeva et al. 2020: 104). In order to preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of the country, the use of national language(s) in the academic world is regarded important. The Universities Act also obliges universities to ensure the position of national language(s) (Finlex 2020F). At the same time, the use of English is viewed as a necessity. The main challenge for local language planning in Finnish universities is aligning these conflicting ideologies and policies.

A common solution in Finnish universities has been embracing some form of parallel language use. Parallel language use allows the coexistence of the national language(s) and English by allocating the use of certain languages for certain contexts. For example, some degree programmes may run in the national language and English separately. Parallel language use is rarely explicitly mentioned in the language policies of Finnish universities, but it is often implied (Saarinen & Rontu 2018: 8-9). For example, Saarinen and Talas (2017) note in their paper that in the language

policy of the University of Jyväskylä the expression “right language for the right context” is used to refer to the parallel use of Finnish and English.

4 Accessibility – Earlier definitions and a language perspective

Accessibility as a term has appeared in several scientific contexts from transport and infrastructure research to health care (E.g. Haugen 2011; Chedid et al. 2018). In a broad sense, accessibility refers to the degree to which a product, service or environment is available to as many people as possible (Schuster 2012: 3). In this chapter, I will first discuss previous definitions of accessibility and build on those to define accessibility for the purposes of this thesis. Following this, I will discuss accessibility work in universities. Finally, I will explore accessibility from a language perspective and expand on the concept of linguistic accessibility.

4.1 Defining accessibility

Accessibility as a general term refers to the extent to which products, services or environments are available for use. In past research, the term has been mainly used in the context of people with disabilities when discussing, evaluating, and ensuring their ability to access and use services in an equal and independent manner (Schuster et al. 2017: 3). Two key dimensions can be identified from this definition: the ease of access and equal treatment. Accessibility not only describes how easy it is for everyone to reach necessary or desired product, services, and environment but also to the possibility of doing this in an equal manner with the maximum amount of independence (Haugen 2011: 2; Schuster et al 2017:3)

At times, the term barrier-free environment has been used as a synonym of accessibility (Lehto et al. 2018: 5). Like accessibility, the term barrier-free environment also refers to products or services being available for use in an equal manner. However, accessibility is regarded as a broader and more comprehensive term of the two. Accessibility includes the idea, that products, services, and environments must be suitable for as many people as possible (Persson et al. 2015: 21). Consequently, accessibility is closely connected to Design for All concept. Design for All refers to inclusive design strategies incorporating accessibility in the process and, thus, promoting accessibility of product, services, and environments for all users (OKM 2010: 12).

In the context of education, accessibility has been also defined as the extent to which everyone has an equal opportunity to operate with others in a physical, psychological, and social environment. Physical environment encompasses buildings, learning materials, teaching methods and tools and psychological environment refers to the appreciation of diversity on an organizational level. Social environment here refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the people operating in the environments (OKM 2010: 12). This division of accessibility into subareas breaks accessibility topics down into more easily digestible areas, but I would argue that this division is somewhat artificial. For example, the attitudes on the organizational level and the attitudes of individuals operating in the university environments are quite hard to separate from each other. Also, the attitudes, especially those of staff members, are reflected in the physical environment i.e. chosen teaching materials and methods.

Building on these previous definitions and focusing on the university context, I will use a rather broad definition of accessibility in thesis. Accessibility will be taken to refer to the extent products, services and environments are available for use for all members of the university community and the extent everyone has an equal opportunity to operate with others in the university environment.

4.2 Accessibility in universities

Previously, the accessibility work in universities was based on the idea of integration. Students, who were deviating from the mainstream were supported with adaption to the mainstream. In the past two decades, there has been a shift away from this integration-approach towards inclusion-thinking. Nowadays, accessibility questions at universities are mainly regarded as part of equality work. Instead of providing individuals support with adaption to the mainstream, accessible and inclusive environment is regarded as a benefit for all members of university community (OKM 2012: 12) Accessibility is viewed as an investment that promotes the well-being and the functioning of the university community through the promotion of equality. Thus, accessible environment serves all members of the community, not only minority groups (Karhu 2014: 3).

The promotion of accessibility is for universities also an institutional duty. The Finnish Non-Discrimination Act, which entered into force in 2004, promotes and secures the realization of equality and enhances the legal protection of victims of discrimination. By law, no one may be discriminated against on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, state of health, disability, sexual orientation, or any other personal reason. According to the act, all education providers must promote equality and measure its realization in their activities (Finlex 2014: 1 – 2). This means that universities must ensure that all students are able to participate fully and operate with others in the study environment. This requires that universities evaluate the different needs of students and identify potential barriers of access and take these into account when planning their activities. When needed, the universities also need to provide for accommodation and potentially adjust their operations to carry out the institutional duties of an education provider (OKM 2010: 8).

4.3 Linguistic accessibility

While the understanding of accessibility as a term has broadened in the recent years, linguistic diversity has not been problematized much when discussing accessibility. Yet, language practices are a key element determining the cultural and linguistic boundaries within an organization (Yanaprasart 2016: 4). The linguistic diversification of university environments has created a need for approaching accessibility also from a language perspective. Schuster (2012:3) defines the linguistic accessibility as “the degree to which a product, service or environment is available to speakers of minority languages”. As this definition was created in the context of evaluating accessibility in public health centers in Canada, the minority languages here refer to the nationally recognized minority languages in Canada. However, linguistic accessibility can also be understood in a broader sense. Matamala & Ortiz-Boix (2016:1) define linguistic accessibility as the ability for everyone to access content in their own language.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will build on both of these previous definitions. I will take the term linguistic accessibility to refer to the extent products, services and environments are accessible for as many as possible in their own language. Here one's own language refers to both their native language and any other languages people can use. The expression "as many as possible" in this context might raise a question — how many languages should be made possible? Indeed, drawing the line is not easy. When discussing linguistic accessibility in the context of linguistically diverse environments of universities or other multilingual organisations, it would be nearly impossible to offer every organizational member an opportunity to operate in the environment using their native language. Schuster et al. (2017:1) state that information and services should be equally available for all people using the services. In the context of universities, I would argue that universities should ensure linguistic accessibility at least in all the languages used in their daily operations. As discussed earlier, universities have an institutional duty to promote equality and accessibility (Finlex 2014). To ensure all students an equal opportunity to operate in the study environment, there is an increasing need for universities to pay attention to the accessibility of their environment, services, and communication from a language perspective. To ensure an accessible study environment for all students, universities must ensure accessibility first and foremost in languages it uses in tuition and degrees.

Potential language barriers in higher education may be caused by a variety of reasons. In this thesis, I am mainly focusing on the challenges resulting from the language practices of a university changing rapidly due to the changes in the surrounding world. Naturally, universities that have operated decades in mainly national languages have had time to develop their services in these languages for longer and starting to use another language requires adjusting all the practices. If services have not been needed in other languages before, it is likely that they do not exist until a need is perceived and intentional changes are made to make the services available. In addition, inadequate language proficiency, either of students or staff, might result in difficulties. Teachers responsible for courses of English-taught degree programmes might not have adequate language skills to provide high quality education. Conversely, students with varying language skills may be in an unequal position.

In evaluation of linguistic accessibility of the study environment, universities must assess all the activities that students are in contact with. I would argue that the most important question to focus on is the linguistic accessibility of the core services, that is all the services necessary for studying. These are aspects like teaching (e.g. access to courses, materials, lectures, online tools, exams), support and study guidance (education services in schools or faculties, centralized education services, guidance counselling), library, international affairs (exchange studies) and communication, and information channels (signage, website, social channels, newsletters, internal portals). It is also important that the universities do not overlook the linguistic accessibility of the support services. With support services I refer here to student restaurants, student union, student organizations, well-being services (study psychologist, sports activities etc.), and other services within the study environment that support the key functions. While not all of these activities are not necessarily always organized by the universities themselves, these are undeniably all part of the study environment. From the perspective of students, it is also often hard to evaluate whether a certain service is part of the university organization, an affiliate organization or external service provider. To promote equality and accessibility in the study environment, universities must also work together with the affiliate organizations and external service providers on the matter.

Of course, linguistic accessibility is not only a matter of the equality and accessibility work at universities, but a matter of language planning and policy. Language planning and policy as a field arose from the need to manage and standardize language use in non-homogenous speech communities and it provides the tools for managing language use within a certain context (Haugen 1972: 512). However, language policy and planning itself does not necessarily aim for creating a linguistically accessible environment. As discussed in the previous chapter, in language planning and policy, there are always language ideologies present. These ideologies are not necessarily one that would aim for ensuring equal access for everyone operating within a certain context. Linguistic accessibility is created through language planning and policy work for which the aim is to create products, services, and environments equally accessible for as many as possible in their own language.

In the language management of Finnish universities, one can note signs of language planning and policy and equality and accessibility work shifting closer together. Language questions are becoming increasingly part of equality work. For example, the University of Oulu does not have a publicly accessible language policy document but in their equality plan also language issues are discussed and “equal access to services in Finnish and English” is explicitly mentioned as a goal (University of Oulu 2019). I made similar notions from the policy documents of the University of Vaasa and will discuss these in more detail in the next chapter.

5 Linguistic accessibility at the University of Vaasa

In this chapter, I will examine the linguistic accessibility of the study environment of the University of Vaasa. First, I will assess how the University considers the role of English language and linguistic accessibility of the study environment in English. Then, I will discuss the results of the survey I conducted for international degree students of the University. I will share their experiences of language-barriers within the study environment and discuss the common themes that arose from the survey responses.

5.1 Policy documents and strategic plans

To examine how the University of Vaasa considers the requirements of the increased internationality and the measures taken to ensure accessibility of the study environment for student who mainly use English, I analyzed a total of 8 documents of the University of Vaasa. These included two language policy documents, three university regulations documents, two accessibility and equality plans, and one strategy document (See page 9 for the complete list of documents). In the following subchapters, I will present my findings by the document type.

5.1.1 Language policy documents

The University of Vaasa has two language policy documents: The language guidelines of the University of Vaasa (orig. *Vaasan yliopiston kielilinjaukset*) and The Policy for the use of Finnish and English. The Language guidelines of the University of Vaasa was issued in 2010 and it covers the guidelines for the language use in administration and internal services, regional collaboration and development, research, and teaching. The Policy for the use of Finnish and English was issued in 2019, and it provides updated language guidelines for the University staff. This document does not include guidelines for teaching and research, as it mainly provides the language guidelines for the University as a working environment. However, these guidelines also play an important role in shaping the language use in the study environment. For this reason, I found it important to also

include this document in the analysis. In addition, for the topics mentioned in both of the documents, the Policy for the use of Finnish and English provides the most up-to-date guidelines.

The language guidelines of the University of Vaasa is a three-page document that sets the goals for the development of the university's language use. The document was created in 2010 and it is available on the University's website only in Finnish. According to the Language guidelines of the University of Vaasa, the official language of the university is Finnish. However, the document also prompts the use of other languages, namely English and Swedish, in specific contexts.

In teaching, the language of instruction is Finnish, except for the University's international degree programs and study modules, in which the language of instruction is English. The development of English-taught programs is regarded as a way to promote the University's internationalization and as a means for recruiting talented and committed students both from Finland and abroad. Finnish and English are in teaching viewed as parallel languages to be used in their designated contexts: English in the teaching of international degree programs and study models, and Finnish for all other teaching. Regarding teaching in English or other foreign languages the document outlines specific guidelines: the University staff will be supported in the development of teaching and service in English, attention will be paid to the language proficiency requirements for teachers during recruitment, and the assessment of teachers' language skills should be a part of the evaluation of the quality of the programs.

The Language guidelines state that the University services are offered in Finnish, Swedish and English. Also in internal communication, the main language is Finnish, but students and staff who do not speak Finnish should be considered as required by the situation. Policy documents and guidelines for staff are created in Finnish, and if needed, in English and Swedish. The aim set in the policy is, that at least documents concerning the University's management and human resource management are available in Finnish and English. In addition, signage should be understandable by students, staff, and visitors without knowledge of Finnish language. The policy states

that for administration and internal communication Finnish is the default language, but that English and Swedish should be used where needed. The document also states that the University seeks to identify barriers caused by linguistic or cultural differences, and consider these in work arrangements, study guidance, as well as support services. Thus, it can be noted that the linguistic accessibility of the university environment is mentioned as a goal in the language guidelines. However, the need for linguistic accessibility in English is in the document context dependent. Whereas teaching in international programs is all in English and the programs thus should be completely accessible in English, in internal communication English must only be used when a need is recognized. This implies that within the University there are decisions made upon which information and services are relevant for international students. This kind of pre-screening based on the linguistic qualities of the target audience may lead to international students mainly being able to access the areas of the study environment that are perceived “international” by the University staff.

To conclude, in the language guidelines document Finnish is regarded as the default language for all areas of the University’s operations — with the exception of research, for which the main language is English. In general, both Swedish and English are viewed as additional languages that should be used in the university operations according to need: Swedish mostly for the purposes of local cooperation and preparing students for working in the bilingual area and English as a part of international activities like international degree programmes and research. The document does however explicitly highlight the value of multilingualism and multiculturalism. The document reflects upon the University’s 2010 strategy goal of supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism and describes the two main aims for the University’s language guidelines. These are supporting high-quality education and research and promoting both the University’s internationalization and regional impactfulness. However, multilingualism in this context seems to be regarded widely as the use of more than one language in the university operations and it is not necessary used here refer to using more than one language to an equal extent.

According to the Language guidelines document, the realization of the goals outlined in the document is reviewed yearly by the rector. The yearly monitoring displays the University's interest to manage its language use continuously. However, the performance indicators are not detailed in the document, so based on just the analysis of the documents it is hard to say how the realization of the goals outlined is monitored.

The Policy for the use of Finnish and English was issued in 2019 and it is available both in Finnish and English at the University's intranet portal Navi. This policy provides guidance more to the language use of the University of Vaasa as a working environment and it is explicitly stated that this policy does not provide guidelines for the linguistic practices of teaching and research. However, as discussed, the language policy of the staff is strongly reflected in the language practices of the study environment too. Also, the Policy for the use of Finnish and English document directly addresses that the number of international students and researchers has increased in the past years notably and that the University of Vaasa aims to provide everyone equal opportunity to participate in the university community regardless of the linguistic background or nationality.

In line with the Language guidelines, the Policy for the use of Finnish and English states that the official language of the University is Finnish. In the document a reference is made to the Finnish Universities Act, which determines Finnish as the official language of instruction and degree as well as the language of administration for the University. However, in the document it is said that in practice the working languages of the University are Finnish and English. All services should be available in Finnish and English as should internal communication. It can be noted that the staff policy deviates here from the language guidelines of the study environment. Whereas the language policy for the study environment only states that in internal communication languages other than Finnish should be used according to the need, in the staff policy Finnish and English are described as equals and that all services should be accessible in both languages. Similarly to the Language guidelines, also in the Policy for the use of Finnish and English, Swedish is mentioned as an important language. However, in this document the use of Swedish is connected more for specific purposes like stakeholder communication. The Academic Library Tritonia, an

affiliate institute, is the only area of the University's activities that should provide services in Finnish, Swedish, and English.

It is interesting to note how the role of English language is regarded quite differently in this language policy for the University's staff compared to the Language guidelines of the University of Vaasa. The Policy for the use of Finnish and English for University staff clearly promotes parallel use of Finnish and English, whereas the Language guidelines promote more ambiguously multilingualism. The Policy for the use of Finnish and English also explicitly states that the University aims to provide equal opportunity for everyone to operate in the university environment. This is perhaps the most notable difference between the two language policies: the staff policy from 2019 seems to start with the goal of providing everyone an equal opportunity to operate in the university environment, while the Language guidelines focus more on adjusting the activities when the target group is international.

5.1.2 University regulations

Besides the language-specific documents, language use at the University is also regulated through the general university regulations. There are three key documents regulating the general university activities: University Regulations (*Johtosääntö*), Degree Regulations (*Tutkintosääntö*), and the Rules of Conduct (*Järjestyssääntö*).

University regulations (University of Vaasa 2017) gives rules of procedure for the University organization. The document lists general regulations regarding the University's structure and describes tasks for different parts of the organization ranging from general university administration to specific roles like that of a research platform director. Language use is only mentioned in this document in connection to the language skills required for teaching and research positions. Regarding the language requirements for teaching and research positions, the document refers to the Government Decree on Universities (Finlex 2020F), which states that the personnel must master the language, Finnish or Swedish, they use in their work. However, by this law universities may

also grant exemptions from these language proficiency requirements as stated in the University's own University Regulations. As the University Regulations of the University of Vaasa note that "Candidates for positions at the University are required to possess the standard of education, experience and language skills demanded to successfully discharge their duties", the university is allowed to hire teaching and research staff with all linguistic backgrounds as long as they are proficient in the language they conduct their work. Regarding the linguistic accessibility of the study environment, this means that the teaching staff should always be competent in the language they teach in. Following that for the international degree programs the language of instruction and examination is English, the staff teaching for these programs are by this rule required to demonstrate adequate English language skills already at the point of recruitment.

The Degree regulations (University of Vaasa 2015) provides the main regulations for degrees and studying at the University of Vaasa. The document states that the language of teaching at the University is Finnish but that language of instruction may also for a basic degree may also be English if "*strategic aims support this, instruction and supervision are provided in English and study attainments can be completed in English*". The document notes that the sufficient possibilities of completing a higher university degree in Finnish must be ensured. Similar protection of possibility to complete higher university degrees in English is not noted, which can be due to a few different reasons. Firstly, the given the global popularity of English as a lingua franca, the University may not see the need for special protection. Secondly, by law, the University is required to ensure enough possibilities to complete university degrees in Finnish. Thirdly, despite the common use, the use English language may not be regarded to hold similar importance than the national language.

As for the language requirements for students, only the Finnish students are required to demonstrate knowledge of Finnish and Swedish according the requirements provided in the law on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies (Finlex 2020C). In addition, local students are required to demonstrate knowledge in at least on foreign language. For students that have been educated in language other than Finnish or Swedish and those who have studied

outside of Finland, the language requirements are not defined in the documents. It is only stated that “In such cases, the faculty shall determine the required language skills”. When discussing the linguistic accessibility of the study environment, this is interesting to note. For the local students, it is assumed that they have knowledge of more than one language used in the study environment. In practice, the local students often have knowledge of Finnish, English, and Swedish all to varying degrees. For the international students, only the knowledge of English is required. Following from this it is likely that the linguistic diversity within the study environment does not pose language barriers to the local and the international students equally. While for the majority of the local students, the linguistic diversity consists of languages they are to some extent familiar with, for international students this is not necessarily the case.

The Rules of Conduct (Järjestyssääntö) provides regulations promoting internal and external order, barrier-free studying as well as safety and comfort of the University community. Of the three key university regulations analyzed here, this document is the only one that is only available in Finnish. The document itself does not take any certain positions regarding language use.

5.1.3 Accessibility and equality documents

The accessibility and equality documents provide guidelines regarding topics relating to accessibility and equality questions in both the study environment and the working environment of the University of Vaasa. For this thesis, I analyzed two such documents: Accessibility plan (*Esteettömyyssuunnitelma, 2009*) and the Equality and Accessibility Plan (*Tasa-arvo- ja yhdenvertaisuussuunnitelma, 2019*). Interestingly, both of these documents do discuss language use in the study environment and also give guidelines regarding best practices of language use.

The Accessibility plan (University of Vaasa, 2009) provides guidelines on accessibility questions. The guidelines are based on the findings of the accessibility report the University had conducted in 2006 and it is available on the University website in Finnish only. The document outlines rec-

ommendations in five different categories: facilities; study guidance; student admissions; information, communication, and cooperation; and working at the University. In the accessibility plan, several linguistic accessibility problems are discussed, and the document provides action plans for each noted issue. The document states a need for more internal communication in English as lack of information of English came up in the University's accessibility survey responses repeatedly. As action to be taken, the document outlines in general increasing internal communication in English, sharing information in English if the target group is international, recommending for student union and student organizations a responsible person for stakeholder communication in English, and increasing the language education for teachers and other staff.

The action plan rates all measures on a scale of 1-3 where one is the easiest to implement and three most difficult due to financial, technical, or other hindrances. The measures were also given values A-C according to the impact of the measure. A refers to the broadest possible impact (here university community), B to medium impact (people in need of adjustments and a part of the university community), and C to low impact (those in need of adjustments). All the measures outlined to improve linguistic accessibility of the study environment in English are rated 3B. This means that these measures are considered difficult to implement but moderately impactful. It seems that it is well understood that the linguistic accessibility does not concern only those in need of adjustments but also other members of the University community. However, removing the linguistic access barriers in this document is viewed as something hard to achieve. It seems that it is well understood that the linguistic accessibility does not concern only those in need of adjustments but also other members of the University community. However, removing the linguistic access barriers in this document is viewed as something hard to achieve.

The Equality plan (University of Vaasa 2017) outlines the gender equality and non-discrimination measures of the University. The Equality plan is available on the University website both in Finnish and in English. The document discusses measures needed to fill obligations for universities given in the Constitution of Finland, the Act on Equality between Men and Women, the Non-Discrimination Act, and the Universities Act. The main goal of the document is to promote equality within

the study environment through spreading awareness, facilitating discussion, and identifying potential challenges in order to shape and maintain an equal operating culture at the University. The plan bases on the findings of the equality survey conducted in 2016. The document includes both the measures taken by the University of Vaasa as an education provider and as an employer, but I will here focus on what is said in regard to the University as an education provider. In the document, the responsibilities and the planned actions are clearly separated in those of the University as an education provider and those of an employer, which makes it easier to focus the analysis only on one of these roles.

While the Equality plan states that the Language Policies of the University of Vaasa set the targets and development measures for language use at the University, the topic is also discussed in this plan. On student admission, the document states that in student admission tools and services applicants' language preferences are considered and language use is adjusted accordingly using Finnish, English and Swedish. Regarding teaching and study guidance, the plan states that practices related to studies and the study environment should be suitable for as wide range of students as possible. Here the language of instruction is mentioned specifically as one area of the study environment. The obligation for the promotion of equality is in particular a responsibility of profit centers, which approve the curriculum and teaching material.

The Equality plan also discusses the requirements of internationalization and how they are considered at the University. The document depicts as the goal "to offer everyone an equal opportunity to participate in the University community regardless of nationality or language". The concrete language-related measures listed to realize this goal are providing guidance, information, and support services for international students; offering the opportunity to study the Finnish language; and suggesting that the Student Union and the student organizations pay more attention to language equality. The document also notes that based on the Equality survey responses, international students feel that they are in disadvantageous position compared to the Finnish students. The areas mentioned as challenging for the international students are course work assessment, employment opportunities, and the distribution of internships and other internal positions

of the University. For these identified challenges, the Equality plans describes development measures.

In the action plan detailed in the document, improving language equality between Finnish and English is lifted as an area of improvement in teaching, services and at the student union. The suggested action for this is “making a clear policy on which University functions are in English and which are communicated in both languages”. This strongly indicates that the University aims for using Finnish and English as more equal parallel languages in these areas. Moreover, I find this phrasing intriguing: it even implies that English would be the more dominant language at the University when this action plan is realized. As another action to be taken in order to improve the language equality between Finnish and English, preparing the language policy of education is noted. The document does not describe this in more detail but based on this information the language guidelines will be updated in a language-specific policy document. In addition, the document discusses the promotion of accessible and barrier-free environment, but language is not explicitly mentioned in connection to these topics.

5.1.4 Strategy

The Strategy 2017–2020 document outlines the University’s current mission and vision for 2025, describes the University’s profile and focus areas, states the strategic development goals, and describes how the development towards these goals will be monitored. The strategy document was issued in 2016 and it is available on the University website both in Finnish and in English.

The role of language is rather invisible in this strategy document; however internationalization is a strongly emphasized focus area. I find this interesting to pay attention to, as the University’s strategy plays a strong role in the shaping of language policies. For example, the current Language guidelines build on the 2010 document in which supporting multiculturalism and multilingualism are the key aims. In contrast to the 2010 strategy, the Strategy 2017–2020 does not explicitly mention multilingualism as a central goal. Still, as mentioned, being global and international are

regarded as valuable. The degree of internationalization is mentioned as one of the key performance indicators for the University to monitor. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the use of English is quite inseparable from the international activities at the University of Vaasa. The strategy is implicitly promoting the use of English in the study environment through highlighting the value of internationality and globality. Yet, the strategy document does not comment on language use explicitly. Interestingly, the use of English language seems to be here regarded as self-evident as the use of Finnish.

5.2 Linguistic accessibility of the study environment from the perspective of international degree students

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, I conducted in 2018 a survey to international degree students of the University of Vaasa to better understand how the international students experience the linguistic accessibility of the study environment. In the analysis of the survey here, I included the received 17 responses from international degree students. All of these respondents also stated that they use English as their main communicative language in the study environment.

The majority of the survey respondents stated that they have not come across any language related issues at the University of Vaasa. Still, approximately a third of the respondents reported that they have experienced problems related to language within the study environment. The students who noted linguistic accessibility problems also without exception reported more than one issue. It can be assumed, that the people who have experienced language-related problems are more motivated to respond to a survey on the topic than the people who have no such experiences. Thus, the actual percentage of students who have experienced language-related problems in the study environment is most likely lower than the survey results suggest.

From the survey responses received, I identified some repeating themes. The main issues noted in the survey answers were concerning the following areas: communication and information,

teaching, and the Student Union of the University of Vaasa. In addition, individual notions were made of language problems relating to sport activities and the activities of student organizations.

The most problems the students reported with access to communication and information. All the students who indicate to have experienced language-related problems in the study environment, mention in some form barriers of access to communication and information in English. Mainly the students noted on a more general level that all information related to studies is not available in English and a feeling like they lack knowledge of some services. Specifically mentioned were the information about studying abroad not always being available in English and the posts on the Facebook page of the University of Vaasa sometimes being only in Finnish.

The second repeating theme in the responses was language problems with teaching. Here it is good to remember that teaching is also the area of university operations that all degree students are likely the most frequently in contact with. In connection with the teaching, in five of the 17 received responses experiences of language problems are noted. The students explained the problems-situations to have caused by teachers' inadequate language skills in English, lectures being held only in the national language(s) and/or the course material not being available in English. It is interesting to note that in two of the responses, the students mention the transfer of language degree studies to the Jyväskylä University and that following transition language problems in teaching began to emerge. In these responses the language-problems were also quite severe as the students mentioned that on some English-taught courses the lectures were held in Finnish and Swedish. On the one hand, this indicates a potential lack of oversight of ensuring linguistic accessibility to teaching during the transfer and transition period for the students concerned. On the other hand, these types of drastic linguistic accessibility issues seem to be of temporary nature and only concern a minority of the international degree students.

The third notable theme that could be observed from the survey responses was language-related problems with the Student Union. The Student Union of the University of Vaasa (VYY) is an affiliate institution of the University of Vaasa. Its main task is to supervise the student interests related

to studies and the status of students locally and nationally (Finlex 2020F; VYY 2020). While the Student Union is technically not part of the University of Vaasa but a separate organization, the two organizations are inseparably linked. All degree students of the University of Vaasa are part of the Student Union and from the perspective of students, the Student Union is a part of the study environment. Hence, the language problems with the Student Union are also language problems in the study environment of the University of Vaasa.

Four of the respondents say they have experienced linguistic access barriers with the Student Union. The respondents mentioned for example that the Representative Council, the decision-making body of the Student Union consisting of elected students, operates only in Finnish. Even though the international degree students may be elected in and the information about the election is shared also in English, the meetings of the Representative Council are held in Finnish. It was also noted that the Student Union organizes a lot of student events and information about these events may not be available in English. One student stated in their response that they did not care if the event itself was held in Finnish, but they would wish that there would always be a description of the event available also in English.

As mentioned previously, in addition to these three main themes individual notions of other language-problems in the study environment were shared. One student noted that they found information related to sport activities hard to find in English. One student expressed interest in joining the student organization Warrantti's activities but found it hard to find information about the events in English.

Reflecting on everything that was shared by the international degree students who responded the survey, one intriguing question remains: what was not said? The purpose of the survey was to gather insights from international degree students and to understand better what kind of services within the study environment they find hard to access in English. This kind of set up gives us only insights into services the international degree students are already aware of but have found them troublesome to access for one reason or another. For the purposes of this thesis, I

found this set up to be good as it allows for recognizing linguistic accessibility barriers that cause feelings of exclusion within English-speaking students. Even though ensuring linguistic accessibility all around the study environment is important, I would argue the causes for feeling excluded are the most important for a university to pay attention to. However, since the ultimate goal is to ensure equal treatment of all students, this should not be the end station. To truly treat all degree students equally, it would be important to also ensure that all students admitted to studies have also the same opportunities within the study environment. For this, it would be important to survey both Finnish- and English-speaking students with similar length of exposure to the study environment and gather information on whether both groups are similarly aware of services or if there are services have made themselves visible only for one of these groups.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to examine linguistic accessibility at the University of Vaasa from the perspective of English language. I started writing this thesis with the assumption that the increased use of English would have naturally led to increased linguistic diversity in the study environment. However, in the case of the University of Vaasa this does not seem to hold completely true. As the English language has gained more grounds at the University, it seems that there has rather been a shift from Finnish-dominated multilingualism towards the parallel use of Finnish and English. In some areas, for example teaching, English seems to have taken over mainly the space previously occupied by the Swedish language. Following this, the increased use of English has not increased the linguistic diversity across all areas of the study environment as much as I initially assumed. Still, the language use at the University of Vaasa has clearly changed in the past two decades.

Through the analysis of the case organization University of Vaasa and its policy and strategy documents, I found that the linguistic accessibility of the study environment is not straight-forward to evaluate. The language practices of the University have changed in a relatively short span of time. In the documents guiding language use at the University, I noticed some misalignment between different documents. This implies that the University is still reacting to the rapid change and looking for the best practices to manage language use. In my analysis of the University documents, I found that the University of Vaasa on the one hand actively thrives to create and maintain a study environment where all admitted students have an equal opportunity to receive services and interact with others. Equal opportunity irrespective of linguistic background is also explicitly mentioned both in the accessibility and equality documents of the university as well as in its language policies.

On the other hand, on a policy-level the use of English is mainly considered necessary in activities perceived as international. For example, the teaching of international degree programmes and study modules operates fully in English. In these areas, the linguistic accessibility in English is also

supported through measures like language proficiency requirements and language training for teaching staff. However, in the areas of operation that are not clearly regarded as international, the use of English is not always regarded as a necessity. For example, in provision of university services and internal communication, the documents guiding language use only state the use of English as a must if the target audience is international.

The results of the survey I conducted for international degree students of the University of Vaasa suggest that there is at times a differing understanding between the decision-makers at the University and its affiliate organizations and the international students regarding what is relevant for the international student audience. Also the language-barriers identified in the accessibility and equality documents of the University signal the same. In both the accessibility and equality documents of the University and the survey responses linguistic barriers of access to communication and information were noted.

In the survey responses, the other two areas of the study environment that were repeating in the responses were teaching and the Student Union. In teaching, the linguistic barriers reported were related to different aspects like teacher's language skills, studying material and language of tuition used. The students who reported language-related problems in teaching were mainly studying in the ending programs at the University, which is important to note as the language-issues may be of temporary nature. In addition, in case of future organizational changes, special attention should be paid to the linguistic accessibility of the study environment during them. In connection with the Student Union, the language-problems stemmed both from activities being held in Finnish only and from the lack of communication and information in English. For example, in the survey responses it was specifically mentioned that the students who speak English would be interested to join events that are held in Finnish, but the information about these events is not accessible for them as it is only shared in Finnish.

The results of this study suggest that there is a need for the University to further align its language planning and policy with its accessibility and equality work. At the moment, the University promotes the creation and maintaining of a university environment where everyone has an equal opportunity to operate with each other as well as the equal use of Finnish and English. Simultaneously, in many of the documents guiding the University's language use, the use of English is only regarded necessary when the activities are perceived relevant for international students. This causes linguistic barriers in the study environment when the students' perceptions of their needs and interests differ from those of the decision-makers.

6.1 Limitations of the study

This thesis has potential limitations due to the fact that the language use in the case University is constantly changing. The survey for international students was conducted in the beginning of year 2018 and there have been language management measures taken by both the university and its affiliate organizations since then. Most notably, the language policy for the university staff discussed in this thesis came into effect in 2019 and this has potentially influenced the language use within the university. Another likely influential action has been taken by the Student Union. Now in 2020, the Student Union took the integration of immigrants as their focus area (Smale 2020). In addition, compared to previous years the Student Union has increased communication in English in their social channels, which are an important communication channel for them to reach the students (Instagram 2020, Facebook 2020).

6.2 Further discussion

Language use in higher education is constantly shifting and evolving. This creates a need for more research into questions revolving around language use in higher education organizations in the next years. Linguistic accessibility encompasses a lot of potential areas that could be looked into more closely in future research. Within the scope of higher education for example, research into the linguistic accessibility of university websites and other online portals, linguistic accessibility

of organizational communication on social media channels, and linguistic accessibility of support services like career services could all provide interesting insights. These insights also provide value for universities that can use the findings to develop their operations.

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