

# Language Strategy

## Roadmap towards trilingualism for Aalto University Student Union

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Universities Act (§46) the languages of Aalto University Student Union (AYY) are Finnish and Swedish. However, a significant number of AYY members, roughly 10 percent in 2010, are international students who know neither Finnish nor Swedish, but employ English as their primary language in Finland. The objective of both the Ministry of Education and Aalto University is to notably increase the number of international students in the future.

In the current situation most of AYY's operation and communication is conducted only in Finnish. To facilitate full participation and membership of minorities in the Student Union the use of Swedish and English must be increased. If the cooperation between language groups is close and coordinated, all members of the Student Union will benefit from the opportunities that arise from internationalisation and diversification of the study environment

The goal is to use Swedish and English alongside Finnish thoroughly, so that when new documents are created they would also be available to language minorities. Swedish or English can be used either together with or in the place of Finnish in AYY functions and activities and their use is encouraged. The use of Swedish and English should not be limited to contexts that directly involve the relevant minorities.

The purpose of the language strategy is to establish common practices on how different languages are to be used in different situations. This will make it easier for individual AYY operators to take the different language groups into account in their own work and act accordingly. Also, goals are set for how the standings of different languages are to be developed in Aalto University.

This strategy only pertains to the use of Finnish, Swedish and English. Other languages can be used on a situational basis, but they have no official position in the Student Union. Implementation of the language strategy is directed by the *Plan for Trilingualism* which is set by the Student Union Board.

### 2. THE STATUS QUO IN THE STUDENT UNION AND AALTO UNIVERSITY

AYY already uses three languages in part of its communication. The weekly newsletter is translated into Swedish and English. There are English segments in each issue of Aino magazine. The most important sections of the slowly changing content on the AYY website have already been translated into Swedish and English. Of all other AYY communication, as much as translation resources allow is translated into Swedish and English. This includes plenty of bulletins and other materials. The material that especially concerns international students is mainly produced in English and the students have their own English mailing lists. Student Union staff has at least basic language skills in both English and Swedish.

However, as it stands there is no guideline regarding what information needs to be translated. For instance, information concerning advocacy work: statements, the Board program and the like, as well as basic AYY documents such as Student Union rules only exist in Finnish. Acting in a position of trust is also based on the use of Finnish. Thus, participating in the Student Union is difficult if one doesn't understand the language. Fixing these issues is made very difficult by the fact that international students are extremely underrepresented in, for example, the Representative Council and the University Board. The student associations within the Student Union also operate mostly in Finnish. Same is true for most events, announcements, campus news and the discussion within AYY: they are in Finnish. Many day-to-day things like street signs and menus are mostly in Finnish in the Otaniemi and Kamp campuses.

Aalto University still has a long way to go before becoming a truly international university. Technology and arts and design education is available in Finnish, Swedish and English and economics education in Finnish and English. However, the quantity and quality of teaching as well as the staff's language skills are somewhat lacking, and the interaction between Finnish and international students during courses is very limited. Nor is there teaching in Finnish and Swedish for the international students that is extensive enough and of high enough quality to support employment in Finland.

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### 3. OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES IN THE STUDENT UNION

The objective is to provide services of equal quality in all three languages. Trilingualism should be apparent in AYY's activities and visual style. It should be easier for language minorities to take part in the activities of the Student Union and the associations within it. The interaction between students from different language groups should be lively.

The starting point is that the same material that interests Finnish students interests language minorities too. International students should not be seen as their own special group with their own separate interests. Only in cases where it is clear that certain information pertains only to a specific language group would the translating of that information into all three languages be considered unnecessary.

The status of Swedish and English cannot be exactly the same: the demand for each differs and this poses different challenges on their use. The status of Swedish has its basis in the law and according to administrative law Swedish speakers must be able to use their language when conducting their affairs at the university. All Swedish speakers do not know Finnish, but most do, to some extent at least, and when faced with a situation where they would have to communicate with a person who is fluent in Finnish but poor in Swedish, they might choose to use Finnish. Also, the Swedish speakers often have the same background information about most issues as the Finnish speakers do.

Most people in the target group for English communication are completely unfamiliar with the domestic languages and have no access to information if it is not provided in English. English is also the only language that everyone in the Student Union can understand to at least some extent and so in some unilingual situations the use of English is justifiable.

The English information should be written so that the meanings of different concepts and terms pertaining to Finnish student culture are made explicit to the reader. However, some of the international students might use Finnish or Swedish as well as English, so to avoid confusion, the different language versions of the same document should nonetheless have mainly the same content. This also makes updating easier. For example the slowly changing material on the AYY website should be made available with the same content in the three languages.

Essential documents concerning the Student Union's advocacy work will be made available in all three languages to ensure that language minorities are able to participate fully in the Student Union, that they are able to follow its activities, take part in discussions and have influence on issues. Documents necessary for dealing with the union, such as information on union services, guides, newsletters and so forth, will be available in three languages. In the early stages important basic documents will be translated as translation projects and this requires more funds to be directed towards translation work in the immediate future. This groundwork will facilitate the later use of English and Swedish in AYY.

In day-to-day communication there are often situations when rendering the same information into three languages would slow the handling of matters unreasonably or simply be overwhelming. In these situations Student Union operators are encouraged to write summaries and cursory translations in at least English, so the international students too can know what the topic is and are then able to ask for more information.

It is important especially when dealing with current events that the translations are made quickly. Perfect synchronization is not necessary, but it must be ensured that language minorities have the information available to them while it is still current. For this reason time limits will be set for the translations of each document type.

For the rights of language minority members it is especially important that they have a possibility to work in positions of trust within the Student Union. The Student Union must make sure that they receive information about the Representative Council Elections, have a genuine opportunity to stand as a candidate and be able to fully participate in the work of the Representative Council or the Board and act as student representatives in university governance. It is important that the possible language barriers are overcome. In the Representative Council and Executive Board it is possible to use Swedish and English alongside Finnish if necessary. Associations, committees, clubs and other voluntary bodies can decide for themselves whether they wish to write their documents in Finnish, Swedish or English. The use of one

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language is enough. It is desirable that a person without knowledge of Finnish would be able to participate wherever he or she wishes within the Student Union and this requires adaptability from all parties.

Student associations within AYY are encouraged to take the language minorities into account. The opportunity to take part in association activities is very important in helping international students adapt to life in Finland. Associations are encouraged to choose a person to handle international issues and the association's English communication. Also, the possibility of making translation services available to associations is being looked into. AYY is also creating a positive attitude towards trilingualism with its own communication.

For trilingualism to work in practice, it is essential that AYY personnel are able to work in three languages without feeling it to be a burden or a negative influence on their work. The staff must have access to needed support and resources, such as supplementary language training, in order to make trilingualism a reality.

The application of the language strategy should not lie solely on only a few sectors, but all Student Union operatives must take it into account in their own work from their own initiative. When hiring new employees language skills and a positive attitude towards trilingualism are among the hiring criteria. When familiarizing new Executive Board members they are instructed to use languages according to the trilingualism principle.

For cost efficiency reasons it is not feasible to have the whole staff translating documents into three languages. For this reason the Student Union must procure sufficient translation resources to ensure that the AYY website, essential documents and announcements are available in three languages. This way the quality of the translations is also maintained. In customer service and other day-to-day communication the use of languages has to be approached practically: it is most important to relay core content. The staff cannot be required to possess excellent control of three languages in addition to their expert knowledge of their own fields. It is more important to encourage the use of foreign languages even when the language skills aren't perfect and offer additional language training if it is needed.

#### 4. ADVOCACY GOALS

AYY together with Aalto University foster the following advocacy goals:

- Aalto University is an international institution that offers its students a diverse and international study environment and high quality education in three languages.
- In Aalto University it is possible to achieve a bachelor's degree in technology and art and design in both domestic languages, and in Finnish in economics. The university is also a developer of the specialized language used in its fields of expertise and this is supported by the strong status of domestic languages in the classrooms. Majority of the courses, especially at the Master's level, can be taken in English.
- Opportunities for international mobility of the university staff will be improved so that they are more plentiful and exchanges are longer in duration. Possibilities to hire support personnel for staff teaching in English will be looked into. In order to improve staff's language proficiency an incentive system will be created.
- The pedagogics and quality of English teaching are an area of emphasis. Personnel without sufficient competence should not be obligated to teach in English. Diverse teaching methods must be used in the classrooms to stimulate interaction.
- Language minority students need to have representation in university governance and Aalto University must support this with its own action. A positive and flexible attitude towards English as a working language is required in governing bodies and workgroups.

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- It is essential that guidance, supervision and information services can all function in three languages. International students' need for information is at least as great as everyone else's, so the same range of materials available in the domestic languages must also be available in English.
- Aalto University must offer international students sufficient access to quality teaching in the domestic languages to enhance their employment possibilities in Finland. More resources need to be forwarded to the teaching of Finnish, in particular. The language teaching must be scheduled so that it does not excessively clash with the student's other studies. Instead of focusing on grammatical perfection, the use and understanding of the spoken language must be emphasized in teaching..
- International students must be able to include Finnish and Swedish studies as part of their mandatory foreign language studies. In the long run the possibility of including mandatory Finnish studies into all foreign-language Master's degree programmes must be investigated.
- An emphasis must be placed on language teaching and it has to support practical language skills, speech and language relevant to the student's respective field.
- Campus environments must be trilingual. Menus, signs, official documents and certificates are examples of things that need to be created in three languages.
- Trilingualism will be promoted together with all cooperating parties, such as the cities of Helsinki and Espoo, university sports services, FSHS (Finnish Student Health Service), Nytyi Student Support Centre, HOAS Student Housing and SYL (The National Union of University Students in Finland).
- Volunteers will be used in implementation of the trilingualism. The Student Union will negotiate with the university about the possibility to get credits for language study for the volunteers.