

**Bi- and multilingual universities – Challenges and future prospects
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Theme 3: Multilingualism at the universities in practice

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FROM MONOLINGUAL TO BI- AND MULTILINGUAL INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

In a recent article, Charles van Leeuwen, Director of the Language Centre of the Universiteit Maastricht, noted that the first European university language centre, the *collegium trilingue*, was founded in Louvain in 1519 by none other than Desiderius Erasmus. The great humanist had found that the average student had an insufficient command of the three necessary languages, namely Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and that the new college could fill that gap. Unfortunately, the first language centre, underfunded and riddled by academic conflicts, was discontinued when Erasmus left Louvain a few years later.

Even today, language centres in various countries are severely underfunded and academic communities continue to suffer from conflicts and in-fighting. Nevertheless, European universities are continuing to pursue a positive language policy with the objective of educating bi- and even multilingual academic citizens. A well-run language centre that is staffed by highly qualified teachers and supported by the whole university community can best reach this objective.

My paper will begin with a brief historical overview of language instruction and language usage at the University of Helsinki, which is celebrating its 365th anniversary this year. My remarks will focus on two specific questions:

- Which languages have been used as media of instruction and why?
- Which other languages have been found important enough to be taught to university students?

The second part of my presentation will take up the situation as we find it today in a multilingual and multicultural language centre within a centuries-old, highly versatile university. Since 1997, the University of Helsinki has pursued a special bilingualism policy, and both bilingualism (Finnish and Swedish) and internationalisation are listed among the ten key areas of development in the University's strategy for the years 2004-2006. The use of Swedish as the language of instruction is increasing, and more and more students and teachers are participating in international exchange programmes. Within the past 20 years, the number of foreign degree-seeking students has quadrupled, as has the number of programmes on offer in which English is the language of instruction. Over the past ten years, the University of Helsinki has thus reinforced its position as a bilingual or even trilingual university, and the Language Centre has played a key role in this process.