

Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre

Evaluation of Estonian research in semiotics and culturology

Visit Dates

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Expert Team

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Part I

General overview

Introduction

The evaluation team consisted of Prof. Vilmos Voigt (University Institute of Folklore, Budapest), Prof. Eero Tarasti (University of Helsinki), Acad. Prof. Anna-Leena Siikala (University of Helsinki) and Prof. Ulrika Wolf-Knuts (Abo Academi University)

Organisator of the evaluation was the Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre (EHEAC). The evaluation was carried out through an examination of documents and a series of visits, interviews and consultations with research staff and students over the period October 23th - October 28th, 2001. Each evaluator had previously received self-assessment reports from the University of Tartu and Tallinn Pedagogical University. Additional material was provided by the evaluated institutes, research groups and individual scientists during the visit.

The visits to institutes started with a general introduction of institute organization, financing, and main research topics given by the directors of each institute or unit. The second stage consisted of leaders of research teams, or research orientations, describing the research activities and their results topic by topic. Of course, the evaluators met the individual researchers and interviewed them. During these meetings the researchers were also asked to give a few representative publications and programs of coming scholarly events for a closer inspection.

Approach to the evaluation

The evaluators were asked to

- 1) judge the activities of research and development institutions and the research topics implemented by them to ensure the state funding for internationally recognised research and development;
- 2) identify deficiencies in the activities of research and development institutions;
- 3) give recommendations on the development concerning research and development and research areas necessary to the state of Estonia.

The team was given the following materials: a working schedule, principles and criteria for evaluation of research and development institutions, guidelines to experts for the research evaluation, and a sample "Evaluation of Estonian Mathematical research".

The team arrived on October 23, 2001 in Tallinn, was shortly briefed and transferred to Tartu during the same evening. The team visited the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu on October 24-25. On October 25 the team interviewed Prof. Peet Lepik from Tallinn Pedagogical University.

Each institute was evaluated using the following criteria on a four-point scale (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory):

1. the novelty of the results of research and development;
2. the quality of research and development, including publication record;
3. the strategy and perspective of research;
4. the competence of research groups and their capability for development;
5. success in applying for funds and grants;
6. national and international co-operation;
7. the implementation opportunities for the research results and their importance for the Estonian society;
8. the correspondence of research and development to the international level.

These criteria were divided into two groups: quality of research and capability of a research unit according to the guidelines to experts for research evaluation. In addition to these criteria, written comments were given according to the guidelines. In the following the research institutes and laboratories are briefly discussed, followed by more specific comments and recommendations.

Part II

General remarks on and recommendations

The reports gave a detailed picture both on research and teaching activities, containing references to publications, further projects and suggestions. They were duly referring to the wider context of researches, both in Estonia and on the international scale. They have contained both the positive and negative details of current research practice on semiotics in Estonia. In case of the Chair of Cultural Theory of the Tallinn Pedagogical University the report contained references to the activity of a single person involved.

The age problem in both cases occurs. At the Tallinn Pedagogical University there is one person involved (born 1935). For continuation of his work soon a younger person is needed. In Tartu (although all the teachers exercise important research work too) nominally there are only two persons as researchers engaged, and their number is very

insufficient for carrying out several different research projects. The publication activity and the organization of nation-wide and international scholarly meetings will need further assistants too.

Part III

Evaluation of institutes and research groups

University of Tartu

General overview

The teaching programme of semiotics as an independent discipline exists at Tartu University from 1992 on, as a result of dissection of the Chair of Russian Literature in the Faculty of Philosophy at Tartu University. Before that time all semiotic research was carried out in Tartu as a part of teaching activity. But, in fact, it was one of the most important research activity in the whole Soviet Union, gaining international fame, from the 1960s on, and this fame is still existing overall. Tartu semioticians could manage the continuation of semiotic researches even after Y. M. Lotman's death, gaining a new start by establishing the Department of Semiotics, currently attached to the Faculty of Social Sciences.

The Department currently has a staff of 10 persons (7 in teaching positions and 3 in others). The head is Professor Peeter Torop. The two research positions are filled by Mihhail Lotman (Senior Researcher) and Anti Randviir (Researcher), both in the field of "Semiotics and Theory of Culture". The research is inseparably bounded to teaching activity at the Department.

Working groups

Three main lines (cultural semiotics – biosemiotics – semiotics of language, literature and art) mark the research. The third line is truly bilingual, devoted equally to Estonian and Russian texts.

Equipment and research facilities are shared both by the teachers and students. The library e.g. is more a research library, even reading list books are available only in single copies. On the other side, the previous publications by Tartu semioticians are available completely.

Rating scale and description

It is a very rare case in evaluation, where the reviewers could only say excellent marks. Semiotic research in Tartu (and this its university Department) is world famous and well accepted everywhere. After some years of unlucky interruption, now it is flourishing again.

Research activity: excellent, it is not only at the high international level, it is one of the research programs in semiotics, which direct international researches. Combining three lines of research (see above) represents the traditions of Estonian semiotics. The international distribution of the Tartu publications needs further improvement. It is important that both research and publication contains also Russian studies (i.e. both on Russian and in Russian). This research activity should be kept also alive, because nowadays there is an international decreasing in good researches on Russian semiotics. Tartu Department, by its good collections of Russian publications, could serve well for further researches too.

Overall capability of the research group: grades excellent (originality 2 + the strategy and perspective of research 2 + multidisciplinary 2 + the competence of research group 2 + national and international cooperation 2 + success in applying for funds and grants 2 = 12).

It is original (that is why it is called “the” Tartu school).

Strategy is clear, and the further researches have been prepared already (Just on the next day after our visit there was a seminar and new trends in semiotics – Semiootiline pööre teaduses.) In February 2002 there will be in Tartu a larger symposium on actual questions of semiotics.

Multidisciplinary and relevance for other research areas: exemplary. The research unit has close contacts with biologists, linguists, psychologists, art historians, culture historians, media experts etc. And this is not a camouflage, but everyday practice of Tartu semiotics from its very starting.

There is a competence and a capability for development in the research unit. Just the two young full time researchers prove the fact. But there will be a need for further development along this line.

National cooperation is extraordinary good. Researchers got various national prizes for their works. The press in Estonia is constantly dealing with achievement of semiotics, which is a rarity throughout the world. International cooperation is revitalized. There would be a need for reopening the world famous “Tartu Summer School of Semiotics”, but at the present the financial circumstances are not good enough.

Success in applying for funds and grants is the way, how the research will be carried on. All the conferences and publications have used funds and grants. But sometimes the research persons are too shy. They do much of their research work without a proper financial support.

Total evaluation: excellent.

Implementation opportunities for the research results are fairly good. They are closely connected with university teaching, and the self-awareness of the Estonian society is very visible.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

1. The research unit is small, its members work together, at the same building, floor and corridor. There are in all-an-hour contacts with each other. The strength of Tartu semiotics was once theory of literature and theory of culture (in Lotman's time). Today biosemiotics arrived to the same level, and it is very popular among the students too. International congresses and publications prove it. The "Tartu way" of translation theory (from the point of view of cultural semiotics – called as "total translation") has been gained recently a wide international acceptance too.

2. Resources at the moment are more or less satisfactory, but there is a need for further improvement both in the library and computerizing. It is a well known and general problem in Tartu (in whole Estonia too) that the distribution of publications is very limited. It is specially acute with the semiotics. Whereas in many social sciences from abroad are bounded to the interest in Estonian topics, for Tartu semiotics there stands a world wide interest, not only because of its topics, but because of its method too.

3. The unit was exceptionally productive. It is simply unbelievable, how a small research group could be so productive. Besides of the talent of the researchers involved, the close cooperation could be of great importance too.

4. See already at point 2. *Sign System Studies* appears again, from volume 29 (2001) on not in one, but in two issues per year. The "Uexküll" special issue of the leading journal of international semiotics, *Semiotica* is by now the actual handbook on the topic. The *European Journal of Semiotics* has recently published its special number devoted to the "New Tartu School". Other invitations for international publishing arrive regularly to Tartu semioticians.

5. See also above, points 2. and 3. In Estonia the Tartu school of semiotics is the brightest trend in this field of research. (There are other, smaller groups and trends elsewhere too. Tartu semioticians have good relations to them.) International academic audience accepts Tartu school very positively. Of course, there are other semiotic trends all over the world (e.g. Peircian, French school, around Umberto Eco etc.). In the teaching of semiotics in Tartu those trends are duly referred to. But in their own researches Tartu semioticians use their own methods. (In plural.)

Tallinn Pedagogical University

General overview

The report describes the situation in a sufficient way, referring to the history of semiotics at the Tallinn Pedagogical University. Now it is a "structural unit"

within the Chair of Cultural Theory. Formerly it had the name Chair of Cultural History and Cultural Philosophy. For the moment this solution is acceptable, but for a longer time semiotics should be more developed in Tallinn too. The whole staff of the Chair includes three members. All of them do not represent semiotics, but their work on culture theory can be complemented with semiotics.

Research activities

There is only one person, Peet Lepik, responsible for teaching and research in semiotics at the Tallinn Pedagogical University. Three students of P. Lepik has already completed their MA degree in Cultural Theory. His research focuses on the Tartu/Moscow school of semiotics and aims at a doctoral dissertation on the universalistic ideas of J. Lotman. Besides that he has produced articles on the semiotic theory of myth and magic. The research work conducted by Peet Lepik serves studies of three MA students specialising in semiotics. This kind of face to face teaching is a rarity in a modern university and certainly beneficial to the students. They can be considered to form a small research group supervised by Lepik. However, in the following we are concentrating mainly on the research work conducted by Lepik.

Peet Lepik has a wideback ground in cultural studies being an expert in the Islamic culture, even his main work is on the nucleus area of semiotics. In recent years he has been active in publishing both in Estonia and other countries, Germany, Italy, Austria and Finland. *His research activities can be characterised as excellent to good.*

The overall capability of P. Lepik to carry out his research is *fairly good*. Even he is handling a classical theme in his dissertation there is, in his approach originality. He has a very clear idea of his priorities in his work. The group supervised by him consists of three students who work in different fields of cultural theory, two of them concentrating on the semiotic theory of film. This shows that there is a potential for multidisciplinary at the research carried out in the institute. The fact that Lepik has not yet completed his doctoral thesis and that there is no postgraduate students in the department is of course a disadvantage. On the other hand, Lepik has good contacts with the department of semiotics in the Tartu university and, besides, some international co-operation. He has been successful in applying for grants both to himself and to his students.

Additional questions

The strength of P. Lepik and his group is the consciousness of the goals and wide experience in the field of cultural studies. The weakness, of course, lies at the size of the personnel. In the department, there is only one person specialised in semiotics and thus burdened with different kinds of work. The situation will improve considerably when Lepik has completed his doctoral thesis.

We met P. Lepik in Tartu and did not have possibility to check the adequacy of resources at the department. The problems of productivity in the unit, however, are clearly tied with the small number of personnel.

Conclusions

We feel that it is important to continue semiotic studies at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute even there is a strong centre at the Tartu university. Two institutes representing the same discipline give a possibility to develop studies in different directions, and thus widen the scope of the discipline. In present situation, the co-operation between Tartu and Tallinn is a must.

Final remarks

Our visit to semioticians in Estonia seems to be a positive one. We could reconfirm the overall existing opinion about the high standard of their teaching and research. It is a positive feature that there is a stronghold of semiotics in Estonia (Tartu university Department of Semiotics), but there are other research and education programs too. It is a grateful situation that Estonian semioticians deal with problems of signs and sign systems with a broad angle and for the international audience. They publish in Estonian, Russian and English quite regularly. We could only wish the successful continuation of their work.

The following recommendations should be made:

- In the future too, they should keep the close ties between teaching and research
- They should continue their attempts to have world wide international contacts
- If finances provide, they should reopen the famous Tartu Summer Schools (of course with international participation)
- The further development of the three major lines (culture semiotics, biosemiotics, semiotics and literature and art) is necessary. It means more positions in research (and in teaching too). There must be a room for other semiotic trends and schools too (e.g. communication theory, Oriental studies etc.)
- Funding should be raised

The scope of our evaluation did use the combined terms “research in semiotics and culturology”. It is according to the institutional system in Estonia, where culture theory and semiotics has worked together, even on institutional level. This tradition is still acceptable. But there are other theories of culture than the semiotic one, and there are other semiotical trends than the cultural one as well. Combining culture theory with semiotics is an important field, and in our report we have referred to that.

The different conditions for semiotics in Estonia during the last decades, as well as at different institutions (universities etc.) now can be harmonized in a better way. Our report – hopefully – will promote it. Again, we close our report with the high esteem of semiotics in Estonia.

Tallinn, October 27th 2001