

Towards flexible multilingualism!

FUURT's recommendations to strengthen language awareness and multilingual practices.

Approved by the Union Board at its meeting on August 24, 2024

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Introduction

Scientific, research, and academic work is international and, therefore, so are the scientific community, higher education institutions, and other research organisations. Internationality also has an impact on language choices: on the one hand, multilingualism and the parallel use of languages are common, while on the other hand, so is the use of English alone as the unitive lingua franca. Not all impacts of internationality on language choices are always recognised or known, and they can be approached with reservations. These issues relate to both foreign-language speakers and their possibilities to manage in Finland, as well as the capacity or possibilities for Finns to utilise languages other than Finland's domestic languages.

By virtue of the Universities Act (558/2009), the language used for instruction and degrees at universities in Finland is Finnish and/or Swedish. Additionally, a university may decide to use a language other than Finnish or Swedish for instruction, degrees, and courses. The language of administration at universities is primarily Finnish with the exception of the few that use Swedish. According to the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014), the administrative language of universities of applied sciences is determined by the language specified in the authorisation to provide education for instruction and degrees, which, in practice, is either Finnish or Swedish. Finland's national languages are Finnish and Swedish, and in this text, it is precisely these languages we are referring to when we talk about domestic languages. In some places, instead of referring to domestic languages, we only mention Finnish, but the inference is that the same is true for Swedish as well.

As science and the scientific communities have become more internationalised, the range of languages at higher education institutions in Finland has become more diversified. In particular, the use and position of the English language has strengthened rapidly. As stated in the recent study, [English alongside Finnish national languages](#) (Laitinen et al. 2023), higher education institutions differ from the rest of Finnish society in terms of their extensive use of English. This may hinder international talents from becoming employed into other sectors after their time at these institutions, particularly if they have completed their studies in English and have not had the possibility to learn Finnish or Swedish.

There are differences between higher education institutions in terms of their use of English. On average, English holds a stronger position in universities than in universities of applied sciences, and of the universities, Aalto University, in particular, has a high utilisation rate of English. The teaching language choices of Aalto University have also

sparked criticism and concern about whether students' linguistic rights to be taught and to complete their degrees in their native language are being met (see [Decision of the Deputy Chancellor of Justice](#) 5 May 2023, in Finnish).

FUURT, as a union and community, has also become significantly more internationalised. The activities of the Union, particularly our member services and communications, have been trilingual (Finnish, Swedish, English) for a long time already. Currently, approximately every second new member of the Union was born somewhere other than in Finland. Some of our international members only remain within the sphere of our Union and in Finland for a few years, but the majority are here to stay. According to [the 2022 member survey](#), the most common residence permit of those members with an international background was either a fixed-term residence permit for a researcher or a permanent residence permit (both were reported by 35% of our respondents with an international background). Altogether 17% of the respondents with an international background had already received Finnish citizenship. (Puhakka 2023, 144–145.)

As the membership of FUURT has become more internationalised, it is more common for active members in member associations or shop stewards to speak some language other than Finnish or Swedish as their native language. In our Union there are users of different languages at different levels, and this needs to be increasingly reflected in the organisation and practices of the Union, not just in member services and communications.





Encouraging multilingualism

Within a community, language can be a unifying or divisive factor. If the community uses a language that not all members have a sufficient mastery of, the experience of inclusion may suffer. On the other hand, encouraging non-native speakers in a multilingual community to use Finnish or Swedish and accepting their way of using the language can serve as a bonding and enriching experience.

It is, indeed, important to be aware of the language practices of one's own community and to allow for the diverse use of languages. We all need to be flexible and understanding, and willing to support and encourage language learners. Speak clearly and help the learner. The parallel use of languages is a recommended and functional method. For instance, the language used in a meeting would not be only Finnish or only English but, rather, both languages as well as, perhaps, others.

Scientific communities and higher education institutions have their own strengths as well as challenges in terms of realising multilingualism. The members of the community are often highly educated and skilled in languages, so it is generally quite natural for them to discuss and handle matters in a language that is not their native language. Furthermore, internationalism is often, in these cases, strongly embraced and assumed, so changing the language and taking speakers of other languages into account is a familiar means of working.

Within organisations, however, there may be partly unconscious habits or vagueness involved when it comes to the languages used in certain situations. For example, a research group may use English most of the time both in their work and during free-time discussions. When, however, members of the same group participate in a faculty meeting or a meeting for the purposes of planning teaching, the general language may switch to Finnish. This might make it impossible for some participants to follow the discussion.

Within an organisation, there may be situations in which the language continuously changes depending on the issue. This could be considered flexible multilingualism, but it may also cause situations in which information is shared in different ways and with different contents depending on the language used. In this case, some of the members of the community may not receive the necessary information on certain issues. Different language backgrounds can also be concentrated in different groups of community members. In Finnish higher education and research organisations, international backgrounds are often more prevalent among students and earlier career stages of staff, while more experienced staff and administrators are mainly native



speakers of domestic languages. In such cases, language practices can unconsciously create and reinforce hierarchies within the organisation, which can hamper, for example, career progression and community involvement.

A researcher decided to participate in a meeting, the agenda of which was given in Finnish and English. At the start of the meeting, the Chairperson asked: "Since we have only one international participant today, is it fine if we hold the meeting in Finnish?" Feeling shy, the researcher could do nothing but smile and nod. She could not, however, follow the meeting and found herself feeling awkward. She also didn't feel comfortable leaving in the midst of everything, because that would have been embarrassing. By the time the meeting ended, the researcher had decided that she would never participate in a similar meeting ever again.

FUURT's recommendation: The meeting language and multilingual practices should be defined in advance. The party conducting the meeting should ensure that every participant is able to follow and take part in the meeting, particularly when that participant can reasonably assume that such will be possible using a specific language.

A problem may also arise if duties and career advancement differ according to an employee's background and language skills. Teaching and administrative tasks may be piled on those who speak Finnish or Swedish as their native language, while employees with an international background may be largely given research-oriented tasks, even though they might want to teach and have the competence for it, for example. Such distributions of tasks could lead to unfortunate bottlenecking situations in terms of career development. Currently, the personnel structure at higher education institutions shows that the share of international personnel in career stages I–II has risen significantly, but the development in career stages III–IV has been slower. ([See The full-time equivalents \(FTEs\) of foreign teaching and research staff at higher education institutions.](#))

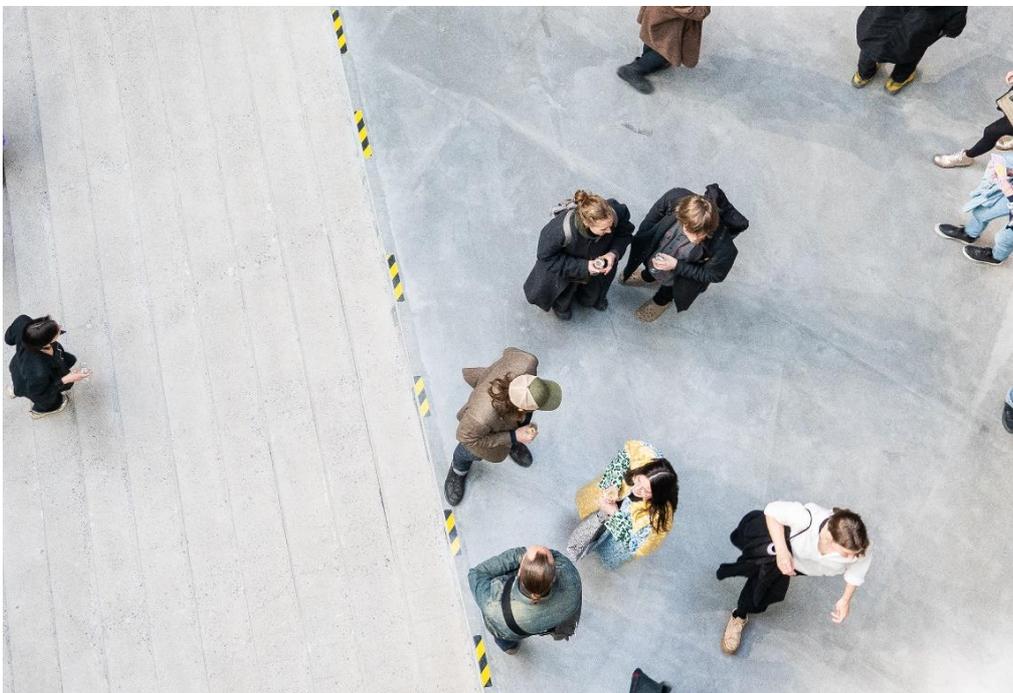
Higher education institutions have become acutely aware of these types of challenges. They have become more linguistically aware, and many have even drawn up or updated their language strategies accordingly. We also strongly recommend that strategies be

drawn up, actively maintained, and put into practice. We emphasise the fact that strategies are of no use if they are not integrated into practice.

The choices related to language use within Finnish scientific communities and higher education institutions are a constant balancing act. It is obvious that English is a necessary part of the international sciences and science community, but internationality needs to be viewed as an issue that goes beyond just the use of the English language. International science and research as well as research-based education also require knowledge and appreciation of other languages.

There is no reason to compromise the position of domestic languages as the language of science and higher education and competence. Broad and dynamic use of these languages will guarantee that research results and viewpoints are understood by a wider audience and will enable science to continue to carry social impact. In general, the social impact of science is increasingly being emphasised in science policies and funding.

It is essential to maintain and standardise Finnish-language terminology within the fields of science, and, to this end, [the Helsinki Term Bank for the Arts and Sciences](https://www.tieteentekijat.fi), for example, plays a key role. We encourage employers to allow their employees to update the Term Bank during working hours. Furthermore, it would be wise to encourage





researchers to publish scientific and popular articles in our domestic languages. Such publication activities should be given due respect, and it may sometimes be justified to give them 'positive special consideration', for example, when assessing the researcher's publications. At the same time, we should acknowledge that the quality of our domestic scientific publications is, generally speaking, very high.

While there may be differences between disciplines, publishing and communicating in the domestic languages should be valued and recognised as a merit for both the individual researcher and the research organisation. Similarly, the publishing and social impact of international researchers in our domestic languages should be supported, so that our society can benefit from the talents available in our country in an increasingly broad and diverse way.

From a teaching standpoint, it is important to note that higher education institutions have specific education programmes whose language is designated as one of Finland's national languages and, in this case, students have the right to use the language in question.

Multilingualism should be viewed as fostering inclusion and promoting new viewpoints, not as a threat to the activities of the community. Language awareness and an openness to the flexible and creative use of language are key factors to embrace. Multilingualism and the parallel use of languages are not, however, simply a matter of will but call for informed awareness and significant resources.

A university teacher at the Language Centre faces an impossible situation. The university has decided to invest in multilingualism, but this means an increase in the number of texts to be translated, and it is not possible to meet this need within the framework of normal working hours. The diligent employee then finds themselves continuously doing overtime work without compensation and driving themselves closer to burnout.

FUURT's recommendation: Multilingualism calls for adequate resources and agreements on work distribution. This factor should be taken into account in the decision making at different levels. The workload of employees should be monitored and made to be reasonable.

Support for studies in domestic languages

Finland faces challenges when it comes to keeping international talent in our country. For example, of those students with an international background who complete a degree in Finland, approximately half will leave the country within a few years after completing their degree (Finnish National Agency for Education, Vipunen education statistics). Even though one might be able to fare quite well in academic circles using only English, the rest of Finnish society and jobs largely still require fluency in our domestic languages. Furthermore, research has shown that genuine participation in Finnish society requires skills in at least one of Finland's domestic languages.

In terms of integration, employment, and career development, Finnish or Swedish language studies should be supported and encouraged flexibly in different life situations. The opportunity to learn and practice language skills should be made possible within working hours or, for example, integrated into doctoral education without it increasing the overall burden on the individual. The possibility and incentives to learn domestic languages should also be viewed as an advantage for the organisation: as language skills increase alongside the other aspects of the experience, the individual may be able to take on more diverse tasks. At the same time, the organisation and society can benefit from the diverse competence and viewpoints of the international employee.

Language studies must, however, be voluntary in nature. Even though certain tasks may come with language skill requirements, studying languages should primarily be encouraged, not forced. If the language skill requirement is included in the employee's job description or language learning objectives are agreed on as part of the work plan or within development discussions, the employer must also ensure a genuine opportunity for the employee to use working hours for language studies.

Individuals have different life situations and plans, and not all plans involve staying in Finland or learning its languages. Nevertheless, the commitment of the employer and





community increase the motivation of the employee, e.g., doctoral researcher, to study our domestic languages. If career prospects and the future appear, however, to be highly uncertain or fragmented, it would likely be difficult for an international employee to find the necessary motivation to learn a new language.

Multilingual organisations should take into consideration the different forms of language studies: languages can be studied through formal courses, but also organically as part of the work environment and interactions with other members of the community. The threshold to learn a new language can be lowered by providing materials in parallel languages and by interjecting Finnish-language vocabulary or expressions into other interactions.

It is important for the Finnish members of the community not to take a pessimistic stance regarding the possibilities of those with an international background to learn our languages. It is fruitless to perpetuate images of Finnish as a difficult language or as being impossible to learn. We must all become accustomed to hearing and understanding different ways of speaking and using the Finnish language. It likely calls for nothing more than familiarisation with different dialects and ways of speaking in general. In addition, speakers of domestic languages can use clear and plain language in their discussions and interactions with language learners.



Recommendations for workplaces

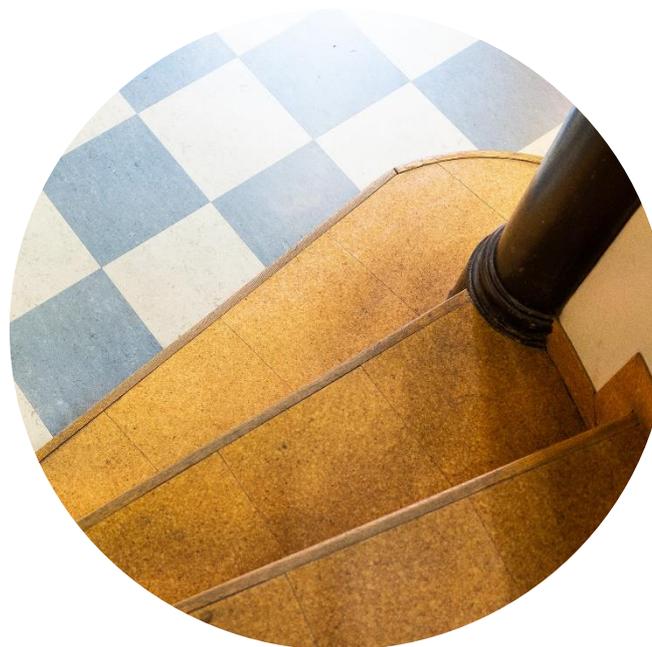
- Multilingual organisations should have a language strategy for their activities. It should also be actively maintained, implemented and updated as the organisation or its environment changes.
- In large multilingual organisations, such as higher education institutions, there is a need to be aware that there are constantly different language users in the community, from speakers of domestic languages to those who are just getting to know the domestic languages of Finland.
- It is important to jointly discuss and agree on language choices within the organisation. Additionally, there needs to be a recognition of sensitivities regarding language skills. In order to avoid any misunderstandings and faulty expectations, it is essential to agree on and announce the language or languages that will be used at shared gatherings and events, openly and in advance. When an organisation's activities are guided by open language awareness, the culture of randomness and false assumptions diminishes.
- The active realisation and facilitation of multilingualism requires resources, particularly time and money (e.g., language planning and maintenance, translation expenses, interpretation services). Thus, sufficient working hours, competence, and financial resources are needed in order to ensure the functional and high-quality use of all languages being used.
- Organisations should agree internally on whose responsibility it will be to ensure multilingual communications and practices. For example, the preparation of multilingual meeting material takes more time than preparation of a monolingual document, which must be taken into account in the working hours and, potentially, in the demand level of the work and related compensation. The possibilities offered by AI, translation programmes, and other technical tools should be utilised, but for quality language use, these are rarely capable of producing an end result that is equivalent to one produced by a human who is familiar with the matter at hand.
- It would be sensible to develop job descriptions with respect for employees' existing linguistic strengths and motivations. In HR planning, it must be assured that, regardless of differing skills, jobs on the same level are comparable to one another in terms of workload and requirements, so that the tasks and burdens of the personnel are fairly distributed.



- Employers and higher education institutions should be honest and open about the language situation in Finland when they recruit employees or students from abroad. The employee or student should, from the outset, have a realistic understanding about language use within the organisation and, more broadly, Finnish society, and the expectations of both parties should be clarified.
- Employers need to be realistic and reasonable when it comes to language skill requirements. Especially with regard to recruitment, it is important to consider what level of competence in the domestic languages would genuinely be required.
- International employees should be able to use their working time to study our domestic languages as part of their own personal skills development. The development of language skills can, by joint decision, be included in the employee's work plan, or can be agreed on in development discussions.
- Similarly, doctoral researchers with an international background should have the possibility to include Finnish or Swedish language studies as part of their doctoral studies. Doctoral education is required to have a higher level of working life relevance, and, in light of this requirement, the inclusion of language studies as part of the doctoral degree is justified. The goal should be to increase the chances for international early career researchers to remain in Finland and find employment in multiple sectors.
- If a task involves language skills requirements or language objectives have been agreed on with the employee, the development of language skills should be viewed as part of the employee's competence development and, possibly, included in their merits and remuneration.
- In addition to formal language studies, employees and students with an international background should be supported and encouraged to learn and become comfortable with our domestic languages in flexible and motivating ways. The entire community should examine the language choices that are being realised in different situations and consider how the threshold to learn our domestic languages might be lowered. Particular attention should be paid to the possibilities for language learning in the context of remote and multi-site working. Active support for language learners and appropriate adaptation of language use is needed.
- In higher education institutions, multilingualism and the possibilities and equality it offers must be taken into account from both the students' and teachers' perspectives. Multilingual implementation methods in teaching, co-

teaching, and other practical solutions can open up new and diverse opportunities for teachers and students alike. The use of an employee's broad language skills, for example in multilingual teaching, should be taken into account in the employee's merit and remuneration.

- Publishing, scientific communication and social impact in the domestic languages should be valued and appropriately rewarded. Similarly, the work of international researchers in domestic languages of Finland and their participation in social debate should be supported and encouraged, for example through proofreading services.
- In the decision-making process of the higher education community, care must be taken to ensure that the members of the community – staff and students – are represented in a way that reflects the diversity of the community. This requires that members of the community with an international background are also taken into account at different levels of the organisation and in decision-making.



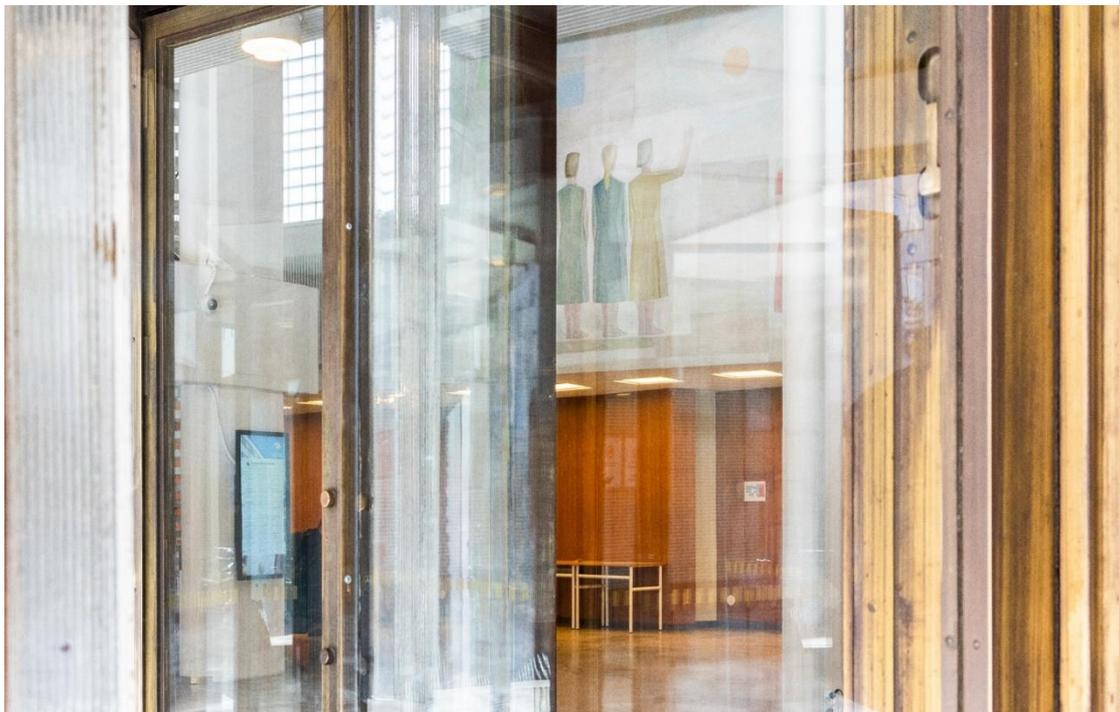


FUURT's objectives to strengthen lingual awareness and multilingual practices within its own activities

- In our Union's strategy, internationality is identified as one of the values of our activities, and multilingualism supports this. It is important for us that our regular and active members with different backgrounds have the possibility to participate in our activities and perceive themselves as an equal part of our community.
- Multilingualism requires language awareness, and practices sometimes require balancing. It is also justified to choose a different language for different contexts and situations. The choice of language must always be justified and communicated openly and clearly. For example, the language or languages of the various Union events and activities must be clearly communicated to participants in advance.
- It must be recognised that multilingual approaches require more resources than monolingualism, which must be taken into account in the planning of the Union's activities and finances.
- The responsibility for English (member) services or activities cannot fall on one individual alone (Union employee or active member). On the other hand, varied wishes and demands with regard to the use of languages can sometimes complicate people's readiness and enthusiasm to participate in voluntary tasks. As part of language awareness, the language skills, willingness, and interest of different parties and work distribution based on these are discussed and agreed openly.
- The Union is actively developing ways to integrate multilingual and parallel language use to facilitate participation in Union activities. The use of parallel languages can be considered, for example, for events and materials, by choosing not to produce separate language versions of materials and events, but by integrating different languages into the same communication (in practice, this means the parallel use of Finnish and English). As part of quality language use, we pay attention to the specific vocabulary of our field of activity and its familiarisation for active members and staff from different backgrounds.
- Since the Union's active members (especially active association members, Union meeting representatives, shop stewards) increasingly have international backgrounds, the Union invests in materials, training, and induction in English.

The Union also ensures sufficient resources for them, for example, as part of its financial planning.

- In the activities and decision-making of the Union, members and active members are taken into account as equally and appropriately as possible. Union general assembly will continue to be held in both Finnish and English. As a rule, the language of the Union's Board meeting materials will be Finnish, but multilingualism may be used in discussions. However, in view of the large number and variety of issues to be discussed by the Union's Board and the time available for meeting preparation, members of the Union's Board must be able to familiarise themselves with the Finnish-language material and follow the discussions in Finnish as well. The working groups of the Union may agree on the working language flexibly among themselves according to the situation and needs. We will identify and explore opportunities to promote multilingual practices in the activities of the Union, including as part of the work of the Board. We will monitor the potential of artificial intelligence for the implementation of multilingualism, while taking care of data protection.





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FUURT language policy working group 2023–2024

In June 2023, the Union Board assigned a working group to prepare FUURT's language policies and recommendations to take a stand on the language of science and science publishing, the language used in higher education and universities, universities of applied sciences, and research institutes, as well as the Union's own operating languages. The members of the group include Terhi Ainiala, Head of Department, University of Helsinki; Sara Backman, Project Researcher, University of Eastern Finland; Union Board representatives Marko Helenius (University of Tampere) and Hanna Lempinen (University of Lapland, as of 1 April 2024 National Resources Institute Finland - Luke) and, as group secretary, Miia Ijäs-Idrobo, Senior Adviser.

In addition to its official members, the working group has also heard from multiple different experts, who are listed below. The group has also examined the language strategies of different higher education institutions that were drafted or updated actively in recent years. The working group's term runs from 1 September 2023 until 30 June 2024.



“Towards flexible multilingualism!” FUURT’s recommendations to strengthen language awareness and multilingual practices. was approved by the Union Board at its meeting on August 24, 2024.

Experts heard by the working group:

4 October 2023 Anna Solin, University of Helsinki.

7 November 2023 Active international members of the Union: Derek Ruez and Vesna Holubek, Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers (TATTE); Andrew Pattison, University of Oulu Academics (OUTI); Felix Epp, Aalto University Researchers and Teachers (ATTE); and Gwenaëlle Bauvois and Syed Ashraf Al Alam, Helsinki University Association of Researchers and Teachers (HUART).

1 February 2024 Professor Pekka Aula, Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, and Professor Petri Karonen, University of Jyväskylä, Federation of Finnish Learned Societies.

29 February 2024 Kielibuusti - Language boost: Johanna Komppa, University of Helsinki and Inkeri Lehtimaja, Aalto University.

22 April 2024 Active international members of the Union: Derek Ruez and Vesna Holubek, Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers (TATTE); Andrew Pattison, University of Oulu Academics (OUTI); and Melissa Plath, Helsinki University Association of Researchers and Teachers (HUART).