

The following text is a translation from Swedish of the debate article “Även engelska bör vara styrande språk på lärosäten” which was published by Uppsala Nya Tidning on June 21, 2020. The original article can be found at:

<https://unt.se/bli-prenumerant/artikel/7r3y1521?fbclid=IwAR3kcd7Cmt3qejwVDFu-ysxdKf36bV5XaBOSxqY3sBkrofCha3MxvLaFtQ>

## **Both English and Swedish should be official languages within Swedish higher education**

10 § Språklagen (2009:600) (i.e. the Swedish law on language) states that the working language for all Swedish authorities is Swedish. This law also applies to Swedish universities and colleges. Compared to other Swedish authorities our universities and colleges are international to a higher degree, which implies that there are both students and employees that do not understand the Swedish language. To have international students and researchers in Sweden is positive for both universities and society in general. But what happens to Swedish universities and colleges if their students and employees to an increasing degree do not, or only partially, speak the language used to govern their institution? What happens with collegiality, the historical governing principal of Swedish universities, if a large number of employees and students cannot participate in discussions and if they have a hard time figuring out what the documents that govern their work say?

These employees will have less influence on the decisions made, will not have the possibility to contribute to the development of their workplace, and will, eventually, feel left out. In the long run they will identify less with their institution, and feel less comfortable in their working environment. These are factors that have long been known to lead to decreased productivity and quality at work as well as to worse mental and physical health. We at the Doctoral Board of Uppsala University have for several years fought for including all PhD students into the different university boards and committees. Unfortunately, without the success that we would have wished for. We often meet PhD students that want to participate and contribute, but are limited because of language barriers. Moreover, doctoral students are a demographic group that is known to have a higher risk for developing mental health problems even without an added language barrier. Language barriers at higher education institutions often lead to isolation and frustration of international staff. Swedish universities, thus, lose energy and potential that international staff and especially junior researchers could bring to their institutions.

The increasing degree of internationalization within higher education requires a change in how language is used. All documents and discussions need to be available in both Swedish and English so that all employees can participate to an equal degree. We need diverse voices in the management to retain the principle of collegiality.

Experiences from students and employees with different backgrounds and from different career stages should be considered in decision making. We need a change in the overall attitude when it comes to using language at higher education institutions. At the same time, better access to high-quality language courses could contribute to the integration of international PhD students so that they might stay in the country even after their studies, and contribute with their knowledge to Swedish society.

Finally, one underlying problem of the described language issue is the initially mentioned språklag. Employees that do not want to hold meetings in English often use the law as an argument. Universities and colleges are not “usual” authorities, however. Therefore, we should consider making higher education institutions an exemption in språklagen, allowing for other languages next to Swedish to be used in administration and management.

Maybe this is the change that is needed to break the resistance to include employees that do not speak Swedish. An exemption from språklagen might facilitate the transformation of our universities to modern and inclusive centres for research and education. Such a development would benefit both the Swedish society, and the international staff that we require for world class research and education.

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