

EVKUR Recommendation: Professionalization of Estonian Sign Language Education

Preamble

The Estonian Sign Language Research Lab (EVKUR) recognises the importance of (i) capacity building of Estonian Sign Language teachers/instructors, (ii) development of Estonian Sign Language competence standards within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), (iii) provision of Estonian Sign Language learning, teaching and assessment materials, and (iv) monitoring the ongoing professionalisation of Estonian Sign Language education.

The professionalization of Estonian Sign Language Education will enable the following

- a) establishment of professional programs / centre of Estonian Sign Language education and sign language interpreting/translation at Tallinn University
- b) creating pools of Estonian Sign Language professionals in four areas: (i) early childhood education, primary/secondary education and adult education, (ii) interpreting and translation, (iii) social services working with deaf communities in Estonia, and (iv) research on Estonian Sign Language.
- c) Implementation of UN-CRPD (adopted on May 30, 2012) and of Language Act with special reference to §3 (adopted on February 23, 2011).

In order to formulate five recommendations for the professionalisation of Estonian sign language education, EVKUR hosted a series of consultation meetings with *Eesti Kurtide Liit*, *Eesti Viipekeelee Selts* and *Eesti Viipekeeletõlkide Kutseühing* in 2024, reviewed existing teaching, learning and assessment materials for Estonian Sign Language and incorporated guidelines from the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages. These recommendations will form the basis for the development of an action plan to be published in June 2025.

EVKUR Recommendations

1. **First Recommendation:** To create an evidence-based state of the art of sign language education in Estonia and to provide an overview of the teaching, learning and assessment framework. To assess the teaching, learning and assessment practices by reviewing the available materials of sign language teachers and sign language education in Estonia as a whole through the Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages and the and to create a comprehensive state of the art.

2. **Second Recommendation:** To ensure the knowledge transfer of research findings of sign language research to Estonian Sign Language Education. To systematically document and describe the grammatical features of Estonian Sign Language, the use of sign language in Estonian deaf communities from a sociolinguistic, multilingual and multimodal perspective, and the language and cultural practices of linguistically and culturally diverse deaf communities in Estonia. This is one of the key prerequisites for the development of metalinguistic and cultural awareness in Estonian Sign Language learners, teachers, assessors, creators of learning, teaching and assessment materials as well as curriculum developers.
3. **Third Recommendation:** To create a profile of teachers and assessors of Estonian Sign Language by analysing the needs and requirements for teaching and assessing Estonian Sign Language as a first and second language. The needs analysis and a comprehensive overview of the differences and similarities in teaching, learning and assessing Estonian Sign Language for different target groups, from heritage signers, hearing parents of deaf children, professionals working with deaf children and deaf adults to deaf/hearing adult students, are the prerequisites for understanding the required basic and additional competencies of sign language teachers.
4. **Fourth Recommendation:** To establish a network of sign language teachers to promote sustainable professional practices in the development of Estonian sign language education and continuing professional training, as well as learning, teaching and assessment materials of Estonian Sign Language. Estonian Sign Language teachers tend to work independently, which can make their professional development challenging. By working with practitioners, we need to support the establishment of a network of Estonian sign language teachers and professionals. The network will enhance the dialogue about sign language education in Estonia, promote the practical implementation of the teacher training programs and teaching competencies, and the use of teaching, learning and assessment materials.
5. **Fifth Recommendation:** To design a curriculum for Estonian Sign Language Education program that reflects the regulations and practices in Estonia as well as the teaching competencies requirements according the framework of Council of Europe and CEFR. Although there has been a dialogue about the creation of a curriculum for a Estonian Sign Language Education program, there is no standardized curriculum to date. A curriculum needs to be developed based on the



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needs analysis and taking into account the previous points of the recommendations. The curriculum must provide a way to acquire skills, competences and knowledge that directly respond to the needs in the Estonian context.