

# UNIVERSITY OF TARTU STUDENT UNION STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026



TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
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# Introduction

This strategic plan has been composed to create consistency in the student union's activities and to set a clear sight for the coming years. The strategic plan has been set for five years, similarly to the University of Tartu strategic plan. Timing UTSU's strategic plan in accordance with the UT strategic plan allows us to take the University's development trends into account and as a basis for writing the next UTSU strategic plan. The strategic plan focuses on UTSU based on the following objectives:



**Members of UTSU are active and competent;**



**UTSU is an information broker to the representatives;**



**UTSU is a consistent organisation;**



**UTSU is a cooperation partner to the university;**



**UTSU is a developer of external communications.**

First, we will set goals that UTSU strives to achieve. Then we will highlight the necessary lines of action to achieve each goal. The problem descriptions on which we based our goals are available as annexes in the end.



Photo: Anette Kuuseorg



The process to compose a strategic plan started at the beginning of 2021. The process was led by the development advisor, who was also responsible for completing the strategic plan. In this, they were helped by students both from inside and outside UTSU, including UTSU's board. During the composing process, they held seminars and discussions with the institute and faculty representatives and asked for input from the students via questionnaires. The more specific time and action plan can be seen in the following table.

<b>February 2021</b>	SWOT analysis
<b>March 2021</b>	Phrasing UTSU's values
<b>April 2021</b>	Phrasing UTSU's mission and vision
<b>May 2021</b>	Collecting input on the strategic plan from students
<b>June-August 2021</b>	Handing over activities related to the strategic plan to the new board
<b>September 2021</b>	Creating the strategic plan's structure and making it into a document
<b>October 2021</b>	Collecting feedback on the strategic plan's first draft from the representatives and cooperating partners and composing the final version
<b>November 2021</b>	Approving the new strategic plan in the Student Parliament

The strategic plan is a goal-based and forward-looking document, which is to be implemented from the moment of approval by the acting composition. The strategic plan must ensure that the student union doesn't start their work from zero every year but that they keep building onto the foundation that their predecessors have already established. Only then can we guarantee a sustainable leading culture that enables us to make big changes and benefit the student body.



Photo: Kristin Randla

# University of Tartu Student Union (UTSU)

The University of Tartu Student Union acts as a structure unit of the University of Tartu that represents and protects the student body's views, rights, needs and interests both inside the university and on a national level. The student union's founding documents are the Statutes of the Student Body, the Electoral Procedure and the Student Union's Rules of Procedure.

## Structure

### **THE BOARD AND OFFICE**

The board and office coordinate the student union's work. The board is responsible for setting and achieving UTSU's strategic objectives. The board is composed of the student union's president and up to two vice-presidents that are elected by the Student Parliament. The office is composed of UTSU's paid staff that assists the board in carrying out their work. The board and the office are collectively called the UTSU HQ (TÜÜE Staap).

### **INSTITUTE STUDENT COUNCIL (ISC aka IÜK)**

The university has 31 institutes, and all but one has an ISC. Each ISC forms at least 20% of their institute council (the exemptions are the genomics institute and Tartu observatory, which have one student representative). By usually composing a fifth of the institute council, they are members with a right to vote there, and they can submit proposals for amendments. The ISC is solely responsible for the students' advocacy on their institute's level.

### **FACULTY STUDENT COUNCIL (FSC aka VÜK)**

The university has 4 faculties in total, and each faculty has a 5-member student council. By usually composing a fifth of the faculty council, they are members with a vote there, and they can submit proposals for amendments. The FSCs help bring the proposals first raised in their faculty's institutes to the faculty council and coordinate communications between the ISCs of their faculty. The FSC is solely responsible for the students' advocacy on their faculty's level.



## **THE STUDENT PARLIAMENT**

The faculty student councils form the Student Parliament, which is the student body's highest decision-making body that elects the student union's board, approves the student union's budget and adopts the student body's political guidelines.

## **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU SENATE**

Five student representatives belong to the university's Senate - the highest academic decision-making body. The Senate handles university-wide decisions, like changes to the study regulations and electing professors

## **THE MONITORING COMMITTEE (JVK)**

The work of the entire student union is reviewed by the monitoring committee that gathers feedback from each level of representatives in UTSU during the year and composes proposals for development for the UTSU board.

## **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE FEDERATION OF ESTONIAN STUDENT UNIONS (FESU aka EÜL)**

The University of Tartu Student Union is a member of the Federation of Estonian Student Unions. UTSU's representatives also belong to the compositions of FESU's decision-making bodies, where they develop and pass on recommendations regarding educational policy to various national bodies of executive power.

## **OTHER DECISION-MAKING BODIES AND WORKGROUPS**

In addition to the previously mentioned decision-making bodies, student representatives are often included in various University of Tartu committees or workgroups, e.g. the committee for students with reduced capacity to work, the budget committee, appeals committee etc. The committees are created, and students are included in them on a need-basis.

# Vision, Mission, Values

UTSU empowers its members, stands for the well-being of the students, improves the student body's university experience and is an equal co-operation partner to the university.

## UTSU's mission is to:

- systemically represent the student body's interests and rights;
- actively and substantially participate in the university's decision-making processes;
- be the connecting link between the university and the students;
- maintain a consistent and unified organisation;
- give the student body's voice weight and carry it.

## UTSU's values are:

- Transparency;
- Openness;
- Inclusivity;
- Being knowledge-based;
- Being innovative.

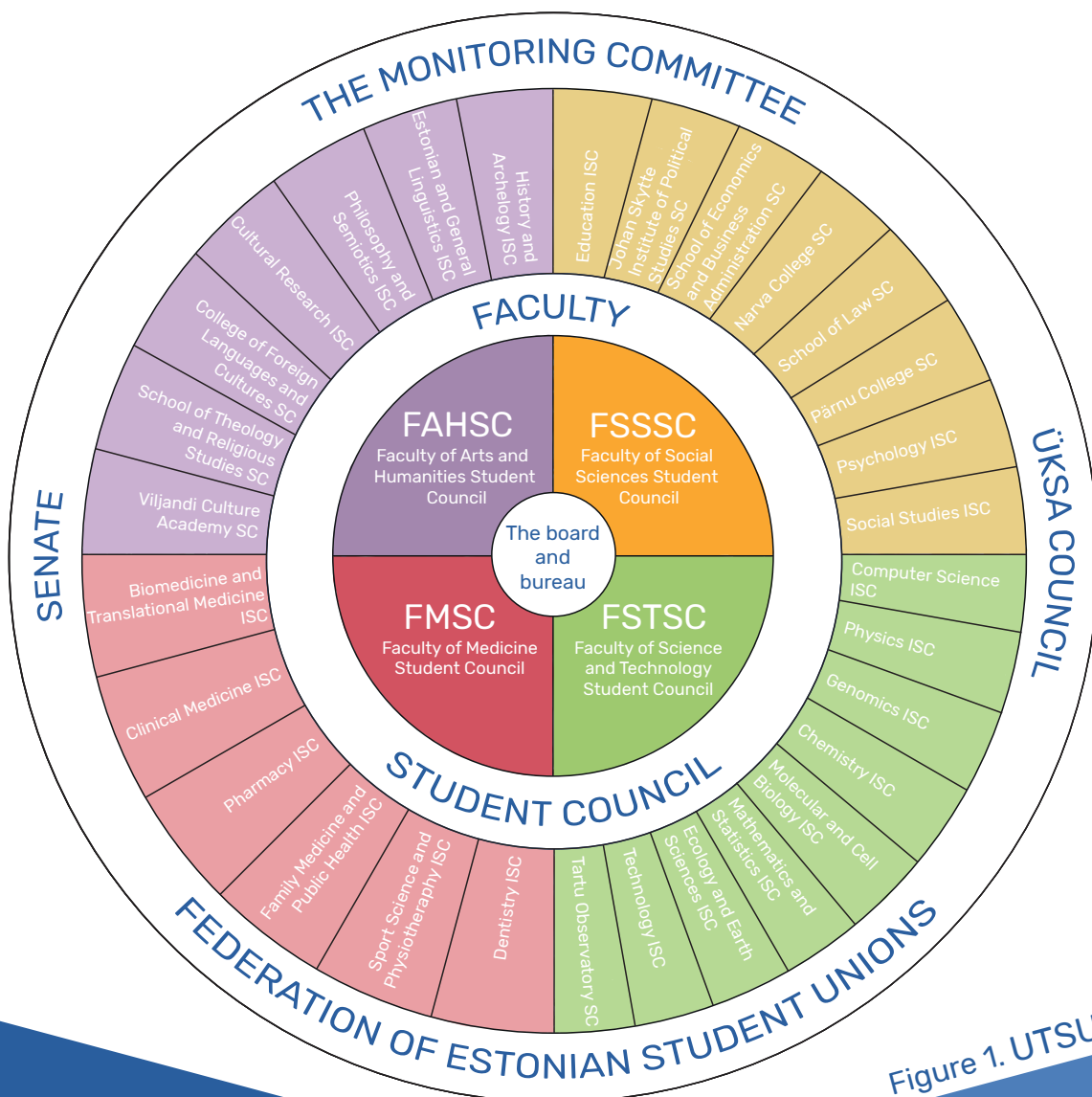


Figure 1. UTSU's structure.

# Goals

## Members of UTSU are active and competent

A representative protects the students' interests, achieves UTSU's goals set in the Statutes, and is an active member of the organisation. An UTSU representative is aware of their assignments and understands how to perform the tasks correctly and comprehensively. They support their fellow representatives and share their knowledge with others. The representative's activities are targeted, and the set objectives make it possible to assess the representatives' activity and competency.

### LINES OF ACTION

#### **1. Developing transfer procedures among the representatives.**

A representative knows their institute/faculty and its operating mechanisms, influences the university's decision-making processes to benefit the students and actively communicates with their constituents. Representatives have understandable and annually updated handover documents.

#### **2. Developing both internal and external communications skills among the representatives.**

A representative raises awareness of UTSU in the student body, creates bridges between students and staff members and actively participates in UTSU's activities.

#### **3. Supporting the representatives in making informed choices in decision-making bodies.**

A representative stands for the candidacy and selection of competent staff members who value cooperation to key positions in teaching and management.

#### **4. Protecting students' interests is a priority both in the representatives' and UTSU HQ's activities.**

UTSU as an organisation for protecting the students' interests maintains the students' rights and creates new opportunities to protect them.





# UTSU is an information broker between the students and the university

Representatives know where to find information and what information is most important. Information relating to the representative's work is shared on the agreed channels and in an understandable form. The contact between the board and the representatives is regular and helps both sides to arrange their organisational work better.

## LINES OF ACTION

### 1. Developing a well-organised communications strategy.

The strategy helps both the office and the representatives to broadcast their activities better. The office knows what information is important and what channels to use for spreading information. A representative knows where to find information relevant to them and how to distribute it accordingly. The information directed towards the students is shared effectively, i.e., the information in various social media channels fits the channel

### 2. Introducing UTSU to students already from the first semester.

Students of the University of Tartu know their rights and of the opportunities as a representative already at the beginning of their studies. They are also aware of the representatives' duties before becoming a candidate. UTSU annually organises awareness campaigns to include students in UTSU's work.

### 3. The university's and UTSU's communications go hand in hand.

The university and UTSU support each other in communicating common messages. UTSU is included in the university's media publications, marketing and campaigns. UTSU is invited to the university's public events.



Photo: Andres Tennus



# UTSU is a consistent organisation

Knowledge and values are transferred from year to year. UTSU ensures that the documents and communication tools necessary to continue the work are passed on when representatives change. The traditions and practices that have formed over the years are important for the representatives and worth keeping. To maintain the consistency of UTSU, it is necessary that stable and fixed financing remains in UTSU as an organisation.

## LINES OF ACTION

### **1. Creating, keeping and spreading UTSU's traditions.**

The representatives are familiar with UTSU's traditions (e.g., the annual events, award ceremonies and workshop weekends) and values. Representatives are actively encouraged to create new traditions as well.

### **2. Recording and preserving operational info.**

UTSU's members record and document their activities to pass on knowledge between representatives.

### **3. Increasing a sense of community among representatives.**

UTSU's representatives actively communicate with each other and share their experiences. The representatives regularly join UTSU's social events to get to know their fellow representatives better. UTSU's events are interesting for its members and when arranging community events, international representatives and representatives with additional needs are taken into account.

### **4. Achieving financial stability.**

UTSU's income and expenses remain balanced. The funding from the university is a fixed percentage of the university's budget. In addition to the university, alternative income sources are sought, which will provide the necessary financial buffer for arranging its activities. Good diplomatic relations are maintained with the university to increase our budget's opportunities to finance the office staff members and projects.



# UTSU is a cooperation partner to the university

UTSU is a respectable and equal partner to the university. The cooperation between the university and UTSU benefits both parties and joint projects boost achieving their goals for both sides. Both the representatives and the office maintain a strong connection to the university's power and support structures.

## LINES OF ACTION

### 1. Writing about joint university-wide projects in the university staff's networks.

The university's faculty specialists are aware of UTSU's activities in their areas of responsibility, and they have been given the opportunity to give feedback to the projects.

### 2. Including the university's experts in university-wide student projects.

The university's specialists actively discuss topics regarding the students' well-being (e.g., developing the university's digital systems or marketing campaigns).

### 3. The ISCs and FSCs include the institute/faculty staff in their activities, if necessary.

The institutes'/faculties' (and through it, the university's governing structures') attitude towards the students improves via the activities of UTSU's members. There is active communication between the representatives and the heads of the university's structure units outside the councils as well.

### 4. UTSU stays informed on the university's projects and contributes to the topics that influence the students.

UTSU's members look for ways to increase the students' inclusion in the university projects that handle topics that impact the students.



photo: UTSU



# UTSU is a developer of external communications

UTSU is a dignified and equal partner to other student organisations and student organisation networks (incl. EÜL, ENLIGHT and OLE ROHKEM). UTSU includes student organisations in its projects and supports their activities. UTSU has representatives that participate in the student organisation networks and protect the interests of the University of Tartu students.

## LINES OF ACTION

### 1. Creating and broadcasting joint projects.

UTSU organises events with the other student organisations and publishes them accordingly in the common student organisation networks.

### 2. Supporting student organisations and protecting interests.

UTSU shares support, skills and knowledge to other student organisations to better lead and organise projects in said student organisations.

### 3. Making the University of Tartu students' opinions heard.

UTSU gives and explains its input to the external partners' activities that impact the University of Tartu students. UTSU works towards having the University of Tartu students' opinions taken into account in discussions and that plans would be made based on these opinions.



Photo: Anette Kuuseorg



# Annex 1. Description of the problems

## UTSU AS A REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATION

**The representatives' motivation is low.** UTSU's goal is to support the representatives in their work. Most of the problems relating to the representatives are tied to motivation - either the lack of motivation or its decrease during the academic year. Since implementing changes and improving the students' well-being in the university is a time- and patience-consuming process, it is also one of the factors that drives down engagement and fervour. This is reflected in the fact that during the 2020/21 academic year, UTSU's representatives attended only about 70% of their institute's councils (at the same time, at least 1 ISC member attended 92% of meetings).

**The representatives' handover procedures are lacking.** The previous representatives don't effectively pass on their knowledge to the new ones. This is also not helped by the fact that new representatives can't accompany the old ones in their practical work (in councils, the Student Parliament etc.). Ignorance about their representative work causes disappointment in the representatives and negatively impacts the reputation of representing - dissatisfied members don't carry UTSU's values, don't bring their friends/acquaintances to our events, and don't recommend them to run to become a representative.

**The representatives have false expectations about representative work.** Representing is, above all, a duty. Despite this, members are often invited to become candidates with the slogan that representing doesn't take too much of their time. Which is why the new members don't understand their purpose and position at the beginning. During the election period, the representative's rights, tasks, and benefits (like UTSU's project-based internship subject that they can get ECTS for) aren't explained clearly to them.



**The representatives don't have a coherent understanding of the university's systems.** The representatives are missing an exact understanding of the university's structure, functioning and how an institute or faculty works internally. This lack of knowledge lowers the credibility of the representative compared to the other decision-makers and damages the relationships with the university's staff. Due to a lack of time, a lack of familiarity with the team etc., the representatives aren't prepared for all the obligatory meetings their role requires. Often the documents are complex and incomprehensible, which makes preparation difficult.

**The representatives aren't in touch with the students' wishes.** It is difficult for representatives to collect feedback from the student body on what students really want. This, in turn, makes it difficult to make the necessary changes. Few students open e-mails sent by the university or links in the newsletters. The probability of answering surveys is even lower. Information collected from surveys is often negative or difficult to solve, which also influences the representative's motivation.

## UTSU IN THE UNIVERSITY

**UTSU's external image among the students is weak.** As an organisation that protects the students' interests, we represent the interests of the entire student body. However, it is difficult to do that when awareness of UTSU's existence, activities and opportunities doesn't reach the students. UTSU is not perceived by the student body as an influential organisation that improves the students' well-being, although we work on it every day. The average student has no interest in the protection of their rights, or they have sensed an injustice and not gotten help to resolve it from anywhere. Many students aren't even aware of where to turn to get help with their problems.

**UTSU is not always an equal cooperation partner for the University of Tartu.** The university's staff and management doesn't see student representatives (and students as a whole) as equal cooperation partners. The factor at work here is that the university and the student representatives sometimes have conflicting priorities, which is why partial mistrust is inevitable. Whether we can improve the students' well-being or not depends on good cooperation.



**Information about UTSU's activities doesn't reach the students.** Communication with the student body is difficult because the contact area with UTSU is small. In Marko Ojakivi's weekly letter to the students, UTSU has its own section, but the limits of the letter are small, and often the union's section doesn't have a lot of information. Also, the students' awareness on the representatives of their institute and faculty, and their activities, is low, since many of the institute representatives don't have a platform where they can show their representative's work activities.

**The students aren't interested in joining UTSU nor voting for UTSU's representatives.** Generally, competition in the UTSU candidates' elections is very low or lacking, and voter turnout is also low. For example, in 2018, the voter turnout was approximately 27%, while in 2021, it was approximately 12.5%. Elections take place in spring, when most students are busy with their spring exams. At the same time, the sooner we hold the elections, the less certain are the students in their future plans. Some institutes have many different specialities, and sometimes there are no representatives from every curriculum, which also reduces voter turnout and satisfaction with the student union - the student doesn't have a representative who is in touch with their problems and who stands for their interests.

## UTSU AS AN ORGANISATION

**The general sense of community in UTSU is lacking.** For the organisation to function consistently, we need representatives who feel not only as a student representative, but also a member of UTSU as an organisation. A large part of the representatives feels emotionally distant from the organisation - they don't participate in our common events nor keep themselves actively informed on how the organisation is doing. Participation in workshop weekends is low (approximately 40%) - especially during spring, when most representatives are tired of the year-long representing work. The workshop weekends are important both for developing the organisation's internal culture and for the new representatives to get settled in the organisation.



**There's no active cooperation between representatives.** There is not always a good team spirit between an institute's/faculty's representatives. The same problem exists in general between all of UTSU's members. If the representatives were more cooperative and would exchange their experiences also between different institutes/faculties, then the knowledge and practice would spread better within the organisation. We could find similar solutions to recurring problems in the university's different units. Due to a lack of sense of community, there is a strong rotation of members, which doesn't contribute to sharing good practices - almost every year, approximately 70% of the membership changes.

**The funding is not fixed and is influenced by the university's decisions.** Our budgetary capabilities are too small to sustain the goals and activities of such a large organisation. The organisation's activities are further restricted by documents that the university itself regulates with the "Description of the Student Union's office" directive. The amount that the university annually distributes to UTSU changes and is not regulated with a fixed rate.

**The board and office have too much administrative workload.** In a university, as a large organisation, there are thousands of decisions and activities taking place daily, that UTSU must keep up with. Therefore, both the board and the office tend to lose understanding of priorities. The board and the office are constantly suffering from being overloaded and are unable to address all the current problems. Simultaneously studying and working in the university is complicated and has a negative effect on UTSU's effectiveness.

**The inclusion of international students is low.** International students have formed less than 5% of the student union in the 2021/2022 academic year, while in the university they make up approximately 12% of the student body. Because of the language barrier, it is difficult to fully include international student representatives in events. Since the university's decision-making bodies' working language is Estonian, it's even more complicated to include the international students in the councils, as the university doesn't translate their materials into English. Although UTSU has a translator, in larger discussions, it's not possible to translate the entire discussion, and a lot of information gets lost. This entire process lowers the international students' activeness as representatives.

