

COPIUS: Lessons Learned



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1. Introduction

COPIUS - Community of Practice in Uralic Studies - was an Erasmus+-funded strategic partnership that ran from 2018 to 2021. It was an alliance between nine European universities with departments or institutes of Finno-Ugric/Uralic studies with the aim to transform existing bonds between participating institutions into a sustainable network involving both students and staff. We consider this drive towards internationalization a crucial step in the development of a low-volume discipline such as Uralic studies.

Low-volume disciplines are those fields at universities and other institutes of higher education, that, as the name implies, have a relatively low number of students, and usually also a concurrent low number of teachers and scholars; they are also usually represented only at a few universities in any one country, often only at one or two, and they are therefore the disciplines that are most under threat from economic challenges and rationalization pressures. Typical low-volume disciplines at European universities are e.g. archaeozoology, futurology, glaciology, music therapy, orthodox theology, and sport economics, all fields, many of which represent old scientific traditions, that do not attract large numbers of scholars. Notwithstanding, the volume and quality of the research produced in these fields is high, conceivably precisely because of their niche position.

Of specific interest to us, and also well represented among the low-volume disciplines, are languages other than the major European languages. Even languages with millions of speakers such as Arabic, Japanese, Thai or Vietnamese, or languages of crucial cultural importance, such as Byzantine Greek, Tibetan or Yiddish, are often considered 'minor disciplines'. Many of these so-called minor disciplines are 'stand-alone' languages, e.g. Albanian, Frisian or Sorbian, but others, e.g. Caucasian studies, Indology, Iranian studies, etc., cover a large number of

(related and/or unrelated) languages and cultures. As a result of this, not every university where such a discipline is present can cover all languages that belong to the discipline, and this is in fact the situation at all departments at all European universities where Finno-Ugric/Uralic languages are taught. This is maybe not a problem as such, but it does mean that students interested in the field do not have access to its complete breadth when they only study at their home university.

This, then, is the limitation to which students were subjected and which the present partnership of nine European universities (ELTE Budapest, Hamburg, Helsinki, LMU Munich, Szeged, Tartu, Turku, Uppsala, Vienna) wished to break down, and the logical way to achieve this was through cooperation. Needless to say, there was and is already interpersonal cooperation through personal connections between researchers of different universities, which is only to be expected in our low-volume field, and, at more official level, interuniversity connections through programmes aimed both at students and teachers such as Erasmus and Erasmus+. Such connections are, however, despite their enormous importance and usefulness, fortuitous in case of personal contacts, and temporary in case of university exchange programmes, and what they have in common is that they are both bilateral. Our goal was therefore to create a framework connecting as many universities as possible, with two main aims: 1) integrating students from various universities into the research community from early on; and 2) enabling multilateral information flow for increasing student-student, student-teacher and teacher-teacher contact, and for developing teaching and the resources that it needs. Mutual reinforcement of teaching and research is a generally accepted aim of higher education institutes, but institutes of Uralic studies in particular, thanks to their low volume, profit from the close contact between the teaching staff and the students. In these collaborative environments, knowledge is co-created and research results are easily shared. This stimulates the interests of students and helps the staff in developing teaching content and methods.

On a more abstract level, the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity also incontestably raises awareness of the existence, multiplicity and importance of smaller languages, many of which are spoken natively by citizens of the European Union; this is an aim the European Union itself supports through one of its founding principles of multilingualism and, though the legal status of minority languages and the extent to which they receive support is determined by national

governments, also more specifically through the encouragement of linguistic diversity by the European Commission.

This output aims to briefly describe what we have learned in the present project, and what we think can be of use to other low-volume disciplines.

2. Previous projects

Eight partners (Hamburg, Helsinki, LMU Munich, Szeged, Uppsala, Tartu, Turku, Vienna) of the present nine participated in the international InFUSE ('Integrating Finno-Ugric Studies in Europe'; 2015-2018; grant agreement number 2015-1-DE01-KA203-002216) project, which also involved blended mobility courses with e-learning modules on various Uralic languages, language nodes and linguistic themes; these courses were taught by teachers from Hamburg (*Introduction to Samoyedic studies*), Szeged (*Lexicology and lexical typology*), Tartu (*the Kamas language*), Turku (*the Mordvin language*), Uppsala (*Introduction to minor Finnic languages*), and Vienna (*the Udmurt language*). These blended mobility courses thus consisted of e-learning modules but also of on-campus teaching at the various partner universities.

The InFUSE project showed 1) that students were thrilled to participate in courses provided by partner universities which for geographical or mobility reasons they normally could not take part in, and were highly satisfied with the teaching activities; 2) students were able to develop and broaden their digital competence due to the web-based modules/components, and 3) students were able to individualize their study programmes through access to a pool of high-quality courses beyond their usual curriculum. We also noticed interest coming from students from outside of the consortium, even from outside Europe.

In addition, the cooperation between the project partners also gave us deeper insights into teaching methods and practices employed by the various partners, which was of great benefit, especially with regard to the development of more serviceable ICT features in their teaching.

3. Students speak

In the present COPIUS project the partners, i.e. the staff at the various participating universities, were in frequent contact, both via email and monthly online meetings as well as during the winter schools and summer workshops, so that there was regular discussion about how the project is progressing and what could be improved or

changed. However, being as the project is ultimately aimed at the educational side of university work rather than at research, we thought it extremely important to have the winter schools and summer workshops evaluated anonymously by the participating students. This gave us much information of often practical value. What follows is a numbered selection of (original, stylistically and orthographically unchanged) student comments from the winter schools and summer workshops organized in the framework of the COPIUS project, which powerfully illustrate student needs, ideas, desires and opinions (as the language of the activities organized by the consortium was English the comments are in English too):

i) The students' realization that they are not alone:

- *Meeting like minded people*
- *Meeting other students*
- *meeting people, being a part of the Finno-Ugric family of the winter school.*
- *Meeting people from different universities*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *Seeing people from other universities, learning new.*
- *Talking to people from other universities*

(2019 Turku Summer Workshop)

- *the possibility to meet other Finno-Ugric studies' students and staff from other universities*
- *Being surrounded by Fennougristics <3*

- *Its general nature as a place where students can gather and have fun while discussing things relevant to their studies.*
- *making contacts with other students/professors*
- *Being able to catch up with and/or get to know the students and teachers of other universities.*
- *getting to know a different university, meeting other students*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *Being able to see each other and communicate.*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

ii) The fact that they are not alone and that their discipline, which may be a minor one at their home university, is in fact also part of a bigger and wider pan-European network encouraged and enabled many students to exchange ideas about their field with students from other universities and generate research ideas:

- *discuss things and maybe plan to do some collaboration or write a paper together*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *inspiring conversations*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *Also seeing relevant studies, research results and current project on the field opened my eyes to see how broadly uralistics can be researched on a global level.*
- *Getting a glimpse of the diversity and character of the Finno-Ugric studies.*
- *to get some feedback and suggestions on my own project*
- *I've been in my own university's bubble for so long that it was really refreshing to see what other people are doing in these fields and how they were approaching similar tasks. It gave me a lot of new things to think about and I met a lot of people that I'd love to keep in contact with.*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

iii) The students therefore also showed great interest in languages and topics not taught at their home universities:

- *nganasan super fun.*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *Getting acquainted with a language that I would otherwise have no possibility to learn.*
- *Getting the chance to learn Mari*
- *Getting to talk about Mari with students and faculty members from a variety of universities*
- *To learn a non-mainstream Uralic language on the linguistic area that interests me the most.*

- *Getting to talk about Mari with students and faculty members from a variety of universities, and just generally being exposed to new info relating to Mari culture.*

(2019 Turku Summer Workshop)

- *possibility to learn a new Finno-Ugric language*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *The course in Inari Saami was for me the most anticipated one and it was enjoyable.*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

iv) Students not only value learning about subject matters and languages not taught at their home universities, but also greatly benefit from learning about familiar subject matters from new perspectives. Thus, research pooling should not only aim to maximize the thematic range available to students at the individual universities, but also to diversify the perspectives on core subject matters. Learning about the same subject from different teachers from different universities is as important as learning about different subjects. These issues were mentioned by many students during the evaluations:

- *learning about different frameworks of research.*
- *finding out who works with what*
- *The people are nice and from a great variety of universities and research topics*

- *the possibility to discuss relevant topics with students working in similar/different subfields*
- *the possibility to present own ideas and learn something new, reflect on my previous knowledge on the studied topics*
- *The IS [= information structure] workshop is really necessary for my own research and I got all the help I needed from the teachers.*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *I didn't know I was interested in this topic until she made me interested in it.*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *As always, it is very interesting to hear from colleagues' new research.*
- *Getting hear about the on going research in the field*
- *Mainly that it provided a possibility for me to achieve knowledge in the field of Finno-Ugric studies that I would probably never achieve from only doing my regular studies at university.*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

v) A number of students who had been to more than one winter school or summer workshop mentioned as a highlight the chance to see students from other universities again, which is of crucial importance for the development of a university-transcending network:

- *Meeting old and new friends*

- *Meeting old and new people.*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

vi) Increased contact between staff and students from different universities is very welcome:

- *Talking to teachers and students from other universities*
- *the teachers are approachable*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *the possibility to meet other Finno-Ugric studies' students and staff from other universities*
- *Being able to catch up with and/or get to know the students and teachers of other universities.*
- *making contacts with other students/professors*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *Also the organisers and teachers were fantastic*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

vii) Also contact between students and young career researchers from different partner universities/countries is important; for students it is motivating it is to see progression from student to researcher:

- *Also, it is really motivating that 2 years ago she was in Vienna as a student-participant and now she had one of the guest lectures.*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *the opportunity to meet all those experienced students and get a notion of projects one might work on later*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

viii) The evaluations also give us a great deal of insight into what students would like to learn in future; this can be taken into account by the teachers at the individual universities, but also in future projects. This obviously included languages not yet taught or taught before the student had a chance to participate, but perhaps of wider relevance were the comments about general topics students were interested in:

- *Sociolinguistic questions: language shift and preservation as well as revitalisation.*
- *Reported speech and thought constructions*
- *Language acquisition*
- *Some topic on psycholinguistics*
- *social linguistics, social pragmatics*
- *Something differing from just linguistic topics*

(2019 Hamburg Winter School)

- *Theoretical lectures on interdisciplinary research*
- *more sociolinguistics, extra info on the current state of affairs, maybe info on fieldwork*
- *Corpus-based approaches to learning/teaching foreign languages*
- *Grammaticalization and language contacts*

(2019 Turku Summer Workshop)

- *Computer linguistics / corpus linguistics*
- *a more differentiated treatment of Chomskyan generative grammar or any generative framework*
- *Fieldwork, pragmatics, sociolinguistics*
- *Language revitalisation*
- *How to deal with sources in languages you don't read*

(2020 Budapest Winter School)

- *More computational linguistics, maybe a small course in Python?*
- *Definitely a basic course on language revitalization.*
- *Courses on minority Finnic languages such as Ludic, Votic, Ludza, Izhorian etc. :)*
- *Other minority/endangered languages. Social linguistics, dialects etc.*

- *Language and culture revitalization projects, especially in the disappearing communities*
- *functional-cognitive linguistics*
- *general scientific skills (scientific writing in Uralic studies)*
- *maybe to do smth more on collaboration between "pure" linguists and computational linguists, workshops on developing and evaluating resources; also some discussions on revitalization or similar stuff (how to make it work, what techniques work, what resources are most helpful, etc.)*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

Some of these comments were of immediate import: as there was an e-learning course with a summer workshop on fieldwork carried out in 2021, the student comments given in previous years concerning fieldwork could be taken into account. Other comments regarding topics suggested by students for future activities were of a more general nature, and indicate that these topics are both 1) of much interest to students and b) perhaps not taught as often as they could be at the participating universities, or, if they are, perhaps taught at linguistics departments and not by the Finno-Ugric/Uralic sections. These are then themes that could be taken into account when curricula are being adapted and/or developed, which could lead to increased student interest and possibly intake at various levels.

4) Staff speak

Feedback left by teachers at our teaching events, including both salaried employees at institutions in our network and external scholars hired to participate in individual teaching events, was elucidating as well:

- *I very much enjoyed seeing students connect with like-minded students at the winter schools and summer workshops*
- *The winter schools also gave staff the possibility to reconnect in person and discuss matters pertaining to teaching and research at our own universities*
- *There's obviously contact between the universities at staff level, but I don't often get the chance to talk to students from other universities*
- *Having recently moved from the student side to the staff, the networking platform that includes both students and professors helped me in this transition. I feel like I have actually been introduced into the community of practice.*
- *At the beginning some new students tended to stay with other students from their own universities, but you could see them mix more day-by-day*
- *Though there is obviously a formal difference between staff and students there did not in fact seem to be formal divide between them*
- *Especially interesting I find colloquia, taking about half a day at each winter school, where the MA and PhD students present the results of their research. It is a gain for students who can get feedback from practically all experts in the field, and in different theoretical frameworks. It is a gain for the staff, too, as it is a possibility to learn new ideas and approaches from the next generation.*
- *During the winter schools, you do not simply discuss your teaching practices and experiences with your colleagues, you actually see them teach, which is much more insightful.*

Whilst staff contact with other staff occurs relatively often either during bilateral university visits or conferences, staff contact with students from other universities usually only occurs during teaching exchanges, typically in the framework of

Erasmus+. During such exchanges staff-student contact may be limited to the hours spent teaching, but during the COPIUS winter schools and summer workshops, where staff and students spend a week respectively working together (often longer when arrival and departure days are taken into account), there is understandably more contact. This then creates and facilitates many more opportunities to discuss current study-/work-related matters, but also future plans concerning languages/cultures/areas of specific interest, possible PhD degrees and positions available, (tips for) employment possibilities, etc.; the fact that there are both teaching-related activities but also more informal get-togethers also creates many possibilities for informal discussion.

5) Lessons learned from project activities

Activities of the COPIUS project can be divided into two main groups: a) intellectual outputs, such as the creation of an online learning platform including theoretical and practical modules, and b) activities such as winter schools and blended mobility events consisting of e-learning combined with summer workshops.

a) The creation of intellectual outputs necessitated close cooperation between the participating partners. However, despite the already existing contact between staff from the different universities and the ostensible awareness we have of each other's specialities and interests, working together more closely did give us a much clearer view of exactly what the strong points of each partner are. This could then be taken into account both in the creation of the outputs, e.g. in help given by other partners to those responsible for specific outputs, but also in the more detailed planning of winter schools and summer workshops.

b) The benefits of the activities organized by the consortium such as the winter schools and summer workshops are clear enough: both students and staff benefit enormously from contact with other students and staff, and students especially, but also staff, benefit from comparing and contrasting their own university (with its concomitant curricula, programmes, languages taught, bi- and multilateral contacts, etc.) to what is offered at the others. The e-learning modules were also very successful, but here student evaluation was to a great extent dependent on the

experience the relevant university had with online teaching; this naturally differed from university to university.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic some activities had to be switched completely to online formats, but this was easily implemented, and in some cases led to an (involuntary) improvement in online teaching skills. In particular, the 2021 winter school as well as the 2020 & 2021 summer workshops were held completely online. On the one hand, this required some adjustments regarding the structure, such as making the schedules more flexible in order to account for different time zones and overlapping activities at students' home universities. On the other hand, it provided us with numerous opportunities which would not be available otherwise, or which we could not think of in previous years. For example, we were able to get many experts from several disciplines to contribute by preparing the teaching and learning materials and commenting on students' work, free from geographic limitations. Furthermore, as no travel grants were necessary for student participants, we could openly advertise our teaching events and open them up to interested and qualified students from outside our network, a possibility that was seized by numerous students from different backgrounds (e.g., students with an interest in our discipline from universities with no designated department of Uralic/Finno-Ugric studies, students of sister disciplines such as Turkic studies). A further positive aspect is that students categorically have fewer inhibitions asking questions and giving feedback and comments using chat functions in a practically anonymous manner without interrupting the teacher than they do in live classroom settings. Although it was fairly challenging to keep people together and to organize informal communication, these aims were facilitated through social events and daily sessions where students presented their own research projects. All this is reflected in the students' feedback, which was generally very positive:

- *I think I learned a lot of new things, new ways of thinking. Besides now I am not that sceptical when it's about online resources*
- *I liked the fact that the Winter School was very flexible*

- *It actually worked very well. The class was easy to follow and I could manage my own time for home assignments. I also think that asking questions via chat worked out nicely, the teacher interacted with the students and answered all the questions*
- *The format reminded that of the winter school and was totally good. The schedule was not too tight and flexible enough to manage. So actually I really enjoyed it like this.*
- *Despite the challenges brought by this global situation, the fact that this time Winter School was held online, lowered the threshold to participate in it. That factor probably brought completely new faces, like me, to the Winter School.*
- *I really liked that it happened! It was good that I could participate, I would not have been able to participate otherwise*
- *It was much cheaper and less time overhead not to have to travel. Because the number of participants was not limited by the size of the classroom it was possible for non-student researchers to participate*
- *The social events were pretty good <...> And they worked surprisingly good, even in online form*
- *In a year when everything else was cancelled or postponed, I am happy that the Winter School still took place. This provided the enjoyable exchange with others*

(2021 Helsinki Winter School)

6) Conclusion

The key outcome ensuing from the COPIUS project, the idea of which ultimately originated from winter schools previously organized by six members of the present consortium as Erasmus Intensive Programmes, are the extremely strong bonds now existing between the participating universities. These bonds existed before, but they

were more of a bilateral nature and in no way comparable to the multilateral network we now have created. The robustness of such bonds is of course partly dependent on a) the bi- and multilateral personal contacts between staff at the participating universities and b) their integration into actual projects such as the present one; existing contacts in the framework of e.g. Erasmus+ add another level to this robustness. However, we are convinced that the existing contacts will transcend any formal project structure, for the following reasons:

i) staff at the participating universities now have a much better overview of what other universities are doing and what their specialities are, such as i) languages taught; ii) linguistic areas of interest (these first two often do not coincide); theoretical frameworks used; contact with closely related neighbouring fields (e.g. Siberian languages in Hamburg, Turkic languages in Szeged, minority studies in Uppsala, Indo-European languages in Vienna, etc. etc.), or even merely awareness of the existence of these neighbouring fields at the partner universities;

ii) staff at the participating universities, thanks to the very illustrative evaluations, also have a much better idea of what their own students *and* the students of other participating universities are interested in;

iii) staff at the participating universities, thanks to the winter schools and summer workshops, also have a much better idea of who the promising students of the other universities are. This has already led to at least one student at one university obtaining a PhD position at one of the other universities; without the possibilities to get to know each other afforded by the winter schools and summer workshops the student in question might not have heard about the open position, would perhaps have known little or nothing about the university, would not have had the possibility to directly ask the relevant staff members questions about it, and perhaps would not have applied for the position;

iv) after many activities organized by consortium staff at the participating universities, from the first winter schools onwards, many students and staff have developed a stronger feeling of belonging; especially with regard to the students we can certainly claim that many of them now think of themselves as being part of a wider community

of like-minded people with similar interests (though perhaps not easily measured, student evaluation of the activities organized by the consortium shows that this is true, as do the friendships we have personally seen blossom). Many if not all of the staff as well, now also have a more intimate sense of community: in addition to our affiliation with our own university, and despite the fact that we are a group of individuals from different universities, from different countries, with individual skills and interests, we, ensuing from participation in the well-functioning, official pan-European network that is the COPIUS consortium, now definitely make up a much more close-knit community, one that did not exist before as such. In discussions about future projects it was self-evident that if possible we would want to involve all partners, and preferably other possible interested parties too, as we're now also always on the lookout for new partners;

v) due to the closer contacts between students (again, as shown by comments in the evaluations) and staff, students who previously participated enthusiastically in a number of the activities but have now managed to move into a scientific career will in all likelihood carry forward the ideal of closer contact between the universities where this low-volume field is taught and studied. In addition, collaboration between the partner universities can and does lead to the creation of valuable research outputs for the communities whose languages and cultures we study; nearly all of these multilingual communities speak minority languages, research on which has been shown to be of inestimable value in the endeavours to maintain their intangible heritage.

All these factors have thus led to a long-term, international virtual community of practice with routines of collaboration and communication, established, improved and promoted by way of these collaborative undertakings. However, as they have their material basis in the existing institutions, their practices and standards, this leads us to believe that the community's sustainability is not directly dependent on any one project or any specific group of people, and will in fact transcend them.

Experience has also shown that interest exists beyond the boundaries or traditional institutions of Finno-Ugric/Uralic scholars and that students from other departments and even other disciplines have shown an interest in our activities; this must be taken into consideration when planning our communication and proliferation

strategies in future. The interest shown by 'outsiders' in our field also shows that it may be beneficial for other disciplines to think about their communication strategies with other fields, including ours (if relevant). In addition, in comparison to students, staff often have other (outdated!) ideas about what useful or effective communication channels are; this means that student input is invaluable when considering how such projects should be publicized and disseminated.

Our project may have had the Finno-Ugric/Uralic languages and cultures at its core, but with the reasons sketched above leading to the creation of our community of practice not being specifically linked to any discipline as such, we believe they are also valid for other low-volume disciplines.