

Assessment of new study programmes in Finland

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Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC)

The Finnish higher education system is quite stable: all universities are government-run institutions, and even the youngest of them are over 30 years old. Polytechnics were established 10-15 years ago. Finland has a national higher education and innovation policy, and there is very little corruption in the country. The country is steered more by information, than by control. Higher education policy is based on a development and improvement approach. Universities and polytechnics are by law autonomous and responsible for the quality of their degrees: *The universities shall evaluate their education, research and artistic activities and their effectiveness. The universities shall also take part in external evaluation of their activities. The universities shall publish the findings of the evaluations they undertake.* (Universities Act).

Steering and management of HEIs is based on three-year performance agreements between the Ministry of Education and each university. These agreements determine quantitative and qualitative targets, the resources needed to achieve these targets, the monitoring and evaluation of outcome, and further development of operations (including starting new education). The steering system highlights the role of evaluation in higher education development. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council is an independent expert body, which assists universities, polytechnics, and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation.

In the Bologna process, the Finnish Ministry of Education delegated the practical implementation work to the universities more fully than in the previous reforms of higher education, and itself concentrated on the preparation of the changes required by the Universities Act and the new Government Decree on University Degrees. Before 2005 there were 20 field-specific decrees on degrees (e.g. Humanities, the Natural Sciences, Medicine), and the right of a university to offer education in special subject area was mentioned in the appendix to the decree. A significant change in the Finnish system was, that in 2005 these specific decrees were replaced by one common decree that includes university degrees in every field. The appendix to this new common decree includes fields (e.g. Humanities, the Technical Sciences), and a list of universities that have right to offer education in a certain field. Except that, there is a Decree of the Ministry of Education defining the fields of study of each university, and starting a new degree education needs an amendment to the decree. Proposals can be made in the annual performance negotiations, but in practice most new fields are opened as Master's Degree Programmes.

The separate Master's Degree Programme was a new concept for the Finnish universities. Most students still pursue their master level studies in subject based education. They get the right to study for both bachelor and master degree with the same application, and can start the second cycle studies immediately after the first cycle has been completed. The new separate Master's

Programmes are mostly thematic, interdisciplinary, answer efficiently the needs of working life and research, and more than half of them are taught in English. Today, about 5% of master level students study in separate programmes. These programmes are mentioned in a special Decree on Master Degree Programmes from 2005, and the Ministry of Education gives each year an amendment to the decree, where approved proposals of new programmes are published.

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Barcelona 21 May 2007

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The context of the Finnish HE system

- quite stable, although a structural development process going on
 - all universities government-run
 - even the youngest over 30 years old
 - a national higher education and innovation policy
 - a society of mutual trust, steering by information
- > universities **can** be responsible for the quality of their activities

Steering and management of HE I

- three year performance agreements between the Ministry of Education and each university
- determine quantitative and qualitative targets, resources needed to achieve these targets, monitoring and evaluation of outcome, and further development of operations
- in the same way, the university sets target outcomes for the faculties and the rector's office carries on performance negotiations with faculties
- the steering system highlights the role of evaluation

Steering and management of HE II

- a national database maintained by the Ministry offers data on universities and fields of education from 1981 onwards
- data collected every year (number of applicants, number admitted, new students, student mobility, degrees, graduate placement, median graduation times, staff, university premises, teacher and researcher visits, scientific publications etc. etc.)
- data is used for allocation of resources, both at national and at institutional level

Finnish universities and quality assurance

- universities by law responsible for quality of their work: must evaluate their education, research and other activities and their effectiveness
- universities shall also take part in external evaluations
- findings of the evaluations must be published
- evaluation policy based on development and improvement approach
- QA systems covering all operations of HEIs
- evaluated by FINHEEC (audit system)

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC)

- an independent expert body
- assists universities, polytechnics and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation
- governed by a decree (1995), consists of 12 members, appointed by the Ministry for a four year period
- members represent universities, polytechnics, students and employers
- organises audits of quality work, institutional, program, and thematic evaluations; is responsible for evaluating the quality of education and institutional performance (research is evaluated by the Finnish Academy)
- member of ENQA

Bologna Process in Finland

- the practical implementation work to the universities; the Ministry concentrated on the preparation of legislation (e.g., before 2005: 20 field-specific decrees on degrees; after 2005: one common decree on degrees)
- situation in the beginning of BP: two-cycle structure familiar (1. 1955, 2. 2005); credit system for 25 years > the structure did not require such a significant change > able to utilize the process in many other ways
- funding for the process: for the degree reform itself and for the development of university education in general
- field-of-study-specific coordination projects

University degree system in Finland 2005-

- Bachelor – Master – Doctor (3 + 2 + 4; 180 + 120 + ? ECTS)
- three-cycle system in all fields except medicine
- education mainly discipline-based, organised into *major* subject and *minor* subject studies
- in the new system: also separate Master Degree Programmes (often multidisciplinary and taught in English)
- universities select their own students; student admission based on prior study attainments and different kinds of entrance examinations

Legislation

- *Universities Act*
- *Government Decree on University Degrees* (+ list of fields of education in the universities, the degree titles and the universities awarding the degrees)
- *Ministry of Education Decree on Master's Degree Programmes* (+ list of separate Master's programmes and universities offering those programmes)

Starting new education

- appendix to the Government Decree: a list of fields of education in the universities
- university (and faculty) has the right to start new education in the fields mentioned in the list (e.g. *History* > *Cultural History* or *Finnish History*)
- for starting to offer education in other fields, the university has to apply to the Ministry for changes in education responsibility
- new fields are negotiated in the annual performance negotiations between the Ministry of Education and each university
- decision made by the Government > very seldom new disciplines

Master level education in Finland

- new students get the right to take both the first and second cycle (for the third cycle they have to apply again)
- after Bachelor's degree they can take their Master's degree **either** by continuing their studies in a discipline based master level education **or** apply for a special Master degree programme
- programmes are organised in cooperation with two or more departments, faculties or institutions (also internationally); they are often multidisciplinary, and more than half of them are taught in English
- today appr. 5% of Master level students study in a special Master degree programme

Starting a separate Master's degree programme I

- * faculty proposes the university a new programme in annual internal performance negotiations
- university makes a decision to propose it to the Ministry
- experts in the Ministry prepare the decision at that level
- Ministry gives every year an amendment to the decree on Master degrees from 2005
- time from making a proposal at the university level to the new amendment: less than 6 months
- criteria for starting a new programme more specified now than three years ago

Main criteria for starting a separate Master's programme

- based on Bachelor level education; admission criteria and annual intake quota clearly determined
- 120 ECTS (some international programmes: 90 ECTS)
- learning outcomes clearly defined
- gives eligibility for third cycle education
- emphasis on multidisciplinary and cooperation (= added value compared with specialization within one discipline)
- a clearly defined need for new education; from the point of view of labour market **or** development of science
- evaluation and QA system
- in international programmes: assurance of the level of language skills; both students and teachers
- no extra resources from the Ministry

Opening new education: the reality

- almost no new **discipline based** programmes
- Bachelor level education mostly discipline based
- new openings in a form of a separate Master's degree programme
- programmes mostly thematic, interdisciplinary, at least one half of them in English
- some joint degrees, but mostly cooperation still at national level
- criteria for opening new programmes becoming more strict (also at the university level)