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Teaching Social Policy in Higher Education in Finland

AT A GLANCE

- Many consider Finland a role model for high-quality teaching.
- Finnish higher education increasingly uses market mechanisms. This shift is changing higher education teaching in social policy, bringing financial and practical aspects into consideration.
- Social policy teaching occurs only at universities. It increasingly takes place within degree programmes that do not have the words “social policy” in their title. Instead, the titles name social phenomena that will be explored in the programmes.
- The career opportunities for social policy alumni are diverse, ranging from expert to manager. The social policy alumni compete with other social scientists on the labour market, stressing their skills instead of their degree.

GERMAN ABSTRACT

Die Lehre in der Sozialpolitik in Finnland wird häufig als fortschrittlich und qualitative hochwertig angesehen. Die Hochschulen veränderten ihren Lehransatz jedoch grundlegend. Neoliberale Ideen traten in den Vordergrund, und die Studienprogramme werden problemzentriert angelegt. Hierdurch verwischen die Grenzen zwischen den Disziplinen und die Sozialpolitik wird schwerer identifizierbar. Weniger als die Hälfte der finnischen Universitäten bieten Studiengänge in der Sozialpolitik oder mit einem größeren Anteil an Sozialpolitikkursen an. Die bestehenden Studienprogramme sehen unterschiedliche und ungenau beschriebene Karrieremöglichkeiten für ihre Absolvent*innen vor, beispielsweise als Expert*innen, Forscher*innen oder Manager*innen. Auf dem Arbeitsmarkt konkurrieren die Absolvent*innen mit anderen Sozialwissenschaftler*innen, und zeichnen sich durch ihre Fähigkeiten statt ihres Abschlusses aus.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Finnish social policy teaching is considered particularly advanced and high quality. Yet, higher education institutions have experienced a turnaround in their teaching. Neoliberal reforms have replaced the Humboldtian ideal, and study programmes are being designed in a problem-centred fashion. This shift blurs scientific boundaries, making social policy teaching increasingly hard to spot. Less than half of the Finnish universities provide degree programmes in social policy or with a critical number of social policy courses. The degree programmes that exist cater towards diverse yet vague career opportunities, with expert, researcher and manager being popular suggestions. Social policy graduates compete on the labour market with other social scientists, scoring with their skills instead of their degrees. As a result of the changes in higher education teaching in social policy, Finland may head towards changes in how the discipline of social policy is represented in universities.

1 Introduction

Social policy teaching has become more important as new social challenges emerge. Global events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, challenge national social policy provisions (Beland et al., 2021). Moreover, new work arrangements, e.g. in the gig economy, challenge traditional forms of social security (Corujo, 2017). To counter these challenges, societies need well-rounded social policy experts. Higher education institutions can train such experts. Consequently, higher education teaching in social policy shapes how societies will fare in the future. Sufficiently sized and high-quality teaching programmes in social policy can facilitate social cohesion, equity, and a high quality life for all population groups. When it comes to teaching and learning, many countries look to Finland for inspiration (Morgan, 2014; Sahlberg, 2012). Finland has consistently performed well in the PISA assessments (Tonga et al., 2022). Moreover, it facilitates equity in learning opportunities (Niemi, 2014). Therefore, findings on teaching in Finland promise to be particularly interesting. This report reflects on the goals and realities of social policy teaching in higher education institutions in Finland.

1.1. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This report combines information from a literature review, an analysis of university homepages, and expert interviews. Five expert interviews were conducted in December 2022 and January 2023. The interviews were with Finnish experts in higher education teaching in social policy. They include individuals responsible for social policy teaching, for alumni relations, for the national promotion of social policy, as well as students' representatives, from four different higher education institutions. The experts gave their informed consent before the interviews, the interviews were audio- (for face-to-face interviews) and video- (for online interviews) recorded, transcribed, and analysed in a thematic analysis. The findings from all these information sources are interwoven throughout the explanations provided on the following pages.

2 Higher Education Teaching in Finland

Higher education teaching in Finland recently underwent fundamental reforms. The first university was founded in Finland in 1640, later following the Humboldtian ideal. This ideal included, among other things, the perception of education as a means for individual enlightenment, the freedom of research and teaching, and the separation of university education from forces outside of the university (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016; Trifuljesko, 2021). The number of universities and universities of applied sciences increased considerably, with new institutions being founded from the 20th century onward. By 2009, Finland had 21 universities and 28 universities of applied sciences, with a total of more than 300 000 students (Aarrevaara et al., 2009). As the university landscape unfolded, changes set in. Finland's accession to the European Union in 1995 brought its higher education institutions a more international orientation, and the Bologna process reinforced this trend. Study programmes were remodelled to lead to bachelor's and master's degrees. Finnish higher education institutions sought to become more competitive on the global market (Ursin, 2019). Moreover, neoliberal ideas gained ground (Hardy et al., 2020). In reaction to these developments, several Finnish universities were merged to create globally competitive institutions. The prime example is Aalto University, which was created in 2010 by merging the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the University of Art and Design Helsinki (Ursin, 2019). Additionally, the Universities Act came into force in 2009 (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009). This Act separated universities from the state, making them independent legal entities that operate under private law. University employees were no longer civil servants (Aarrevaara et al. 2009; Ursin, 2019). From this point on, universities received their funding from the government through a system of management by results, research grants, tuition fees, donations, and endowments (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009; Ursin, 2019). This new setup led to a change in perspective that some describe as operating on educational markets (Piironen, 2013), others as academic capitalism (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014). Considerations of efficiency and effectiveness loom large, activities become resource dependent, and the needs of the economy and labour market steer activities (Aarrevaara et al., 2009; Kohtamäki, 2019; Ursin, 2019).

2.1. SITUATING SOCIAL POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING

Social policy is a discipline that is commonly taught in the framework of social sciences studies at Finnish higher education institutions. In our interviews, a representative of a national organisation in the area of social policy remarked that within Finland, social policy is situated close to sociology. The reason for the closeness is that in Finland the discipline of social policy within universities emerged out of the discipline of sociology. In the 1950s, social policy was still a specialisation within sociology at Finnish universities, and social policy

research was considered sociological research (Owens, 1954). Because of the closeness between sociology and social policy, both disciplines share many features – more so than other disciplines that were not historically merged with social policy, such as political science and history. Social policy and sociology also share many challenges, such as the increasing pressure for societal impact and research commercialisation, which is part of the neoliberal turn of Finnish universities (Komp, 2018; Trifuljesko, 2021). Another challenge is the restructuring of teaching programmes around problems, instead of disciplines. Several of our interviewees reported on this phenomenon. It can blur the boundaries of social policy and make the discipline as such less visible, even though the contents may remain within the study programmes.

3 Social Policy Teaching in Finnish Higher Education

At the timing of writing (late 2022/early 2023), Finland had 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences. One of the universities, the National Defence University, has a slightly different legal setup than the other institutions, exclusively serving the military community (Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, 2023; Ursin, 2019). It will nevertheless be included in this report for the sake of completeness. In 2021, the universities and universities of applied sciences had more than 310 000 students altogether, with the share of women being slightly higher than that of men (Statistics Finland, 2023).

3.1. STUDY PROGRAMMES ON SOCIAL POLICY

Although Finland has a high number of higher education institutions, it has few study programmes explicitly focussing on social policy. For this report, we understood study programmes explicitly focussing on social policy as programmes where students can explicitly specialise in social policy or a social policy-related topic. Table 1 provides an overview. It presents information that was collected from the homepages of the universities and universities of applied sciences and supplemented with information from the interviews. This table shows that only six out of the 38 higher education institutions in Finland provide such a programme. All of these institutions are universities, making up less than half of the universities in Finland. The universities offering study programmes in social policy are: Åbo Akademi University, Tampere University, the University of Eastern Finland, the University of Helsinki, the University of Jyväskylä, and the University of Turku. All of these institutions offer study programmes in social policy at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level. While each of them offers only one study programme in social policy at the bachelor's level, the number is higher at the more advanced levels. The universities have between one and three master's programmes on social policy, with the highest numbers at Tampere University. Also, they have one or two doctoral programmes in social policy, with the highest numbers at the Universities of Eastern Finland and Turku.

3.2. STUDY PROGRAMMES WITH A CRITICAL NUMBER OF SOCIAL POLICY COURSES

Just like the study programmes explicitly focussing on social policy, those with a critical number of social policy courses are also rare in Finland. For this report, we understood study

programmes with a critical number of social policy courses as programmes where students could not explicitly specialise in social policy or a social policy-related topic, but could nevertheless take several social policy courses during their studies. Only two of the higher education institutions offered such programmes at the time of writing. Again, both of these institutions were universities: Åbo Akademi University and Tampere University. Both also offered study programmes specialising in social policy – which indicates that both institutions offered a range of study programmes, with social policy playing different roles in the different study programmes. The number of study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses was low. Only one of the universities offered them at the bachelor's level; at the master's level only one option per university is available, and no options existed at the doctoral level. LUT University only established a social sciences department in 2022 and it is about to launch its new study programmes in 2023 and 2024. One of the interviewees provided more information on these programmes. From 2023 onwards, LUT University will offer a bachelor's programme in the social sciences that also contains a critical number of social policy courses. From 2024 onwards, it will additionally offer a master's programme that will most likely also contain a critical number of social policy courses. The doctoral programme will not contain such a critical number. Interestingly, there seems to be no connection between whether a university provides study programmes explicitly focussing on social policy and those with a critical number of social policy courses. Some universities provided only one of these options, others both, and others neither. Table 2 gives an overview of these findings. It presents information that was collected from the homepages of the universities and supplemented with information provided by the interviewees.

3.3. DISCIPLINARY BACKGROUND AND KEY SUBFIELDS OF THE STUDY PROGRAMMES

The study programmes in social policy or with a critical number of social policy courses have a range of thematic orientations. Table 3 presents these orientations, using information that was found on the university homepages and collected within the expert interviews. This table clearly shows the difference in topical focus between those study programmes that explicitly provide social policy education, and those that contain a critical number of courses in it. Those programmes that explicitly focus on social policy have more traditional topical orientations, whereas those with a critical number of social policy courses were more strongly problem-oriented. For example, the master's programme on comparative social policy and welfare at Tampere University assigned at least 55 of the 120 ECTS credits to social policy and welfare topics, such as 'Nordic welfare societies', 'The liberal welfare state', 'Welfare state theories' and 'Concepts and comparisons in social policy research'. In contrast, the master's programme on social exclusion at Åbo Akademi University has only 15 of 120 ECTS credits assigned to social policy courses: 'Social exclusion: key approaches', 'Diversity, equality, inclusion', and 'Social exclusion and working life'. More courses with relevance for social policy can be taken on a voluntary basis, such as 'Philosophies of inclusion: Moral and political transformations' and 'Diversity and inclusion in working life – from theory to practice'.

All universities that provide study programmes in social policy offer a bachelor's programme and a master's programme in the social sciences. Social policy is a specialisation within these programmes, leading to a degree in the social sciences with a specialisation in social policy. Additionally, three universities offer thematically more specialised master's programmes in social policy. Tampere University offers a master's programme in work, welfare and well-being, and another in comparative social policy and welfare, and the University of Turku offers a master's programme in inequalities, interventions, and new welfare state. All these master's programmes are explicitly designed around social policy considerations. The University of Helsinki offers a master's programme in contemporary

societies, in which social policy can be chosen as a specialisation. When it comes to doctoral programmes, the universities also choose a mixed approach. All universities offer a doctoral programme in the social sciences, even though they give it different names. Åbo Akademi University, Tampere University, and the University of Helsinki call it simply 'Social sciences', the University of Eastern Finland calls it 'social and cultural encounters', the University of Jyväskylä calls it 'Social sciences and philosophy', and the University of Turku calls it 'Social and behavioural sciences'. Within these doctoral programmes, social policy is a specialisation. Additionally, two universities offer a doctoral programme that is structured around social policy ideas: the doctoral programme in 'Welfare, health and management' at the University of Eastern Finland, and the doctoral programme in 'Inequalities, interventions and new welfare state' at the University of Turku.

Those universities that offer degree programmes with a critical number of social policy courses chose different focuses. Åbo Akademi University provides a master's programme in social exclusion, and Tampere University offers a bachelor's programme and a master's programme in sustainable urban development. At the time of writing, LUT University was still finishing the design of its bachelor's and master's programme in the social sciences. However, one interviewee could already provide some insight into what is to come. The bachelor's programme will focus on the social sciences and critical systems, such as energy, water, and technology. This programme will contain a number of social policy courses when it officially opens its doors for the first time in autumn 2023. The master's programme will start one year later, and it will probably have a similar focus.

4 Job Market the Study Programmes Target

The study programmes in social policy and those with a critical number of social policy courses aim at a heterogeneous job market. Table 4 shows which career opportunities the universities envision for the alumni of their study programmes, according to their homepages. Interestingly, all but one university listed career opportunities on their homepages which show that they have job profiles in mind towards which they orientate their teaching. Among the career opportunities listed, some areas receive considerably more attention than others. The first one is research-related jobs, which five universities listed as 'research' and one as 'data analyst'. A second category is jobs requiring expertise, which three universities listed as 'expert', three name specific areas of expertise, and two name 'consultant' as a field of work. A third commonly named area is that of social tasks, with seven mentions under various descriptions, such as 'social workers', 'social design', or 'social director'. A fourth area is that of management and leadership, with seven mentions. Some universities mention it in general terms, whereas others locate it within the public sector. The remaining mentions cover a wide area, reaching from 'teacher' via 'entrepreneur' to 'journalist'.

Several of the interviewees commented on the job market for social policy students. They agreed that getting a degree in social policy provides individuals with useful skills that employers might value. However, these interviewees also agreed that social policy graduates compete as social scientists on the labour market – not specifically as social policy graduates. The students' representatives mentioned that they find it challenging to identify a job title that directly captures their studies, suggesting that 'researcher' and 'expert' might be suitable occupations. The individual responsible for alumni relations and the person representing the discipline of social policy at the national level agreed with this assessment. The alumni relations officer underlined that social policy graduates performed on the labour market in the same way as other social scientists.

5 How the Study Programmes Promote Social Policy Research and Scientific Careers

Considering that research is one of the foremost career options for social policy students, it comes as no surprise that the study programmes in this field promote social policy research and scientific careers. They do this through various means, primarily by providing research-based teaching, requiring students to write a final thesis, and offering mandatory research methods courses. The idea of having research-based teaching stems from the Humboldtian ideal of higher education, and it is one of the key Humboldtian features that persisted throughout the Finnish university reforms (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016). This principle is even explicitly mentioned in Section 2 of the Finnish Universities Act: “The mission of the universities is to [...] provide research-based higher education [...]” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009). The Act thus legally anchors this approach to teaching, and it is obligatory for all universities in Finland. While writing a final thesis is not required according to the Finnish Universities Act, it is a common practice at Finnish universities. According to our review of the university homepages and our interviews, all programmes in social policy and those with a critical number of social policy courses require students to write a final thesis. This requirement exists at the bachelor, master, and PhD level. This means that students do get an introduction to research, and they do conduct their own research, no matter what level they are at. In some programmes, they receive additional research training through research methods courses. However, whether these courses are provided and whether or not they are mandatory differs across universities and programmes. Table 5 provides an overview. It shows that research methods courses are mandatory in almost all programmes, with only five doctoral programmes making them optional. These courses can be in qualitative or quantitative methods or in both. However, the choice of courses taken as part of doctoral studies not only depends on the regulations of the doctoral programmes, but also on the preferences of the doctoral students and their supervisors. We can expect the supervisors to encourage doctoral students to take research methods courses, even if these courses are not mandatory.

6 Conclusions

Higher education teaching in social policy is in flux in Finland. It is being reshaped by the neoliberal turn of Finnish universities, bringing study programmes closer to the market and to practical considerations. The programmes are increasingly designed with a problem-centred approach, which makes the discipline of social policy less visible. For example, some of the study programmes focussing on social policy have titles such as 'Work, welfare and well-being', 'Contemporary societies', and 'Inequalities, interventions, and new welfare state', and some study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses have titles such as 'Social exclusion', 'Social sciences and critical systems', and 'Sustainable urban development'. Yet, students and study advisors are equanimous about this shift, arguing that the skills and not the discipline shape the graduates' labour market chances. This development raises the question whether social policy teaching will still exist in Finnish higher education institutions in the future. The shift in study programmes reduces the need for social policy specialists at universities, and the new profile of the students reduces the amount of social policy specialists that Finland has at its disposal. As a result, the discipline of social policy itself will approach a watershed in Finland. It will be interesting to observe what remains of social policy at Finnish universities as the disciplinary boundaries are blurred. Moreover, it will be interesting to see how other countries will assess this development in Finland – which is considered a role model for high-quality education.

**Table 1: Finnish study programmes in social policy, by higher education institution
(status: December 2022)**

	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Doctoral programmes
<i>Universities</i>			
Aalto University	-	-	-
Åbo Akademi University	1	1	1
Hanken School of Economics	-	-	-
LUT University*	-	-	-
National Defence University	-	-	-
Tampere University	1	3	1
University of Eastern Finland	1	1	2
University of Helsinki	1	2	1
University of Jyväskylä	1	1	1
University of Lapland	-	-	-
University of Oulu	-	-	-
University of the Arts Helsinki	-	-	-
University of Turku	1	2	2
University of Vaasa	-	-	-
<i>Universities of applied sciences</i>			
Arcada University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Åland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Centria University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Diaconia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Humak University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Häme University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-

JAMK University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Kajaani University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Karelia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
LAB University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Lapland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Laurea University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Novia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Oulu University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Police University College	-	-	-
Satakunta University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Savonia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Tampere University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Turku University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-

Note: *social sciences taught from autumn 2023 onwards

Table 2: Finnish study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses, by higher education institution (status: December 2022)

	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Doctoral programmes
<i>Universities</i>			
Aalto University	-	-	-
Åbo Akademi University	-	1	-
Hanken School of Economics	-	-	-
LUT University*	(1)	(1)	-
National Defence University	-	-	-
Tampere University	1	1	-
University of Eastern Finland	-	-	-
University of Helsinki	-	-	-
University of Jyväskylä	-	-	-
University of Lapland	-	-	-
University of Oulu	-	-	-
University of the Arts Helsinki	-	-	-
University of Turku	-	-	-
University of Vaasa	-	-	-
<i>Universities of applied sciences</i>			
Arcada University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Åland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Centria University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Diaconia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Humak University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Häme University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-

JAMK University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Kajaani University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Karelia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
LAB University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Lapland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Laurea University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Novia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Oulu University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Police University College	-	-	-
Satakunta University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Savonia University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Tampere University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Turku University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-
Vaasa University of Applied Sciences	-	-	-

Note: *social sciences taught from autumn 2023 onwards

Table 3: Thematic orientations of the study programmes in social policy and of those with a critical number of social policy courses, by higher education institution (status: January 2023)

	Bachelor's programmes	Master's programmes	Doctoral programmes
<i>Study programmes in social policy</i>			
Åbo Akademi University	Social sciences	Social sciences	Social sciences
Tampere University	Social sciences	(1) Social sciences (2) Work, welfare and well-being (3) Comparative social policy and welfare	Social sciences
University of Eastern Finland	Social sciences	Social sciences	(1) Welfare, health and management (2) Social and cultural encounters
University of Helsinki	Social sciences	(1) Social sciences (2) Contemporary societies	Social sciences
University of Jyväskylä	Social sciences	Social sciences	Social sciences and philosophy
University of Turku	Social sciences	(1) Social and behavioural sciences (2) Inequalities, interventions, and new welfare state	(1) Social and behavioural sciences (2) Inequalities, interventions, and new welfare state
<i>Study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses</i>			
Åbo Akademi University	-	Social exclusion	-
LUT University*	(Social sciences & critical systems)	(not yet decided)	-
Tampere University	Sustainable urban development	Sustainable urban development	-

Note: *The bachelor's programme will start in autumn 2023, the master's programme in autumn 2024

Table 4: Job market aimed at, by higher education institution (status: February 2023)

	Career opportunities
Åbo Akademi University	Customer advisor, planner, administrator, social director, elder care leader, social worker, family worker, teacher, executive manager, researcher, journalist
LUT University*	Public relations manager, business unit manager, consultant, sustainability specialist, data analyst
Tampere University	Strategic and managerial posts in public sector organisations, societal expertise, communication tasks, political career, teacher, researcher
University of Eastern Finland	Expert, designer, researcher, entrepreneur, journalist
University of Helsinki	Social design and development, social worker, researcher, consultant, expert
University of Jyväskylä	-
University of Turku	Expert, designer, researcher, labour market expert, social worker, consumer representative, administrative leader, spokesman, coordinator, teacher

Note: *social sciences taught from autumn 2023 onwards

**Table 5: Table 5: Research methods courses, by study programme and university
(status: February 2023)**

	Programmes	Methods courses
Åbo Akademi University	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social exclusion	mandatory
	PhD in social sciences	voluntary
LUT University*	Bachelor in social sciences and critical systems	mandatory
	Master (title N.N.)	mandatory
Tampere University	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Bachelor in sustainable urban development	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in sustainable urban development	mandatory
	Master in work, welfare and well-being	mandatory
	Master in comparative social policy and welfare	mandatory
	PhD in social sciences	voluntary
University of Eastern Finland	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	PhD in welfare, health and management	mandatory
	PhD in social and cultural encounters	mandatory
University of Helsinki	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in contemporary societies	mandatory
	PhD in social sciences	voluntary
University of Jyväskylä	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	PhD in social sciences and philosophy	mandatory

University of Turku	Bachelor in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in social sciences	mandatory
	Master in inequalities, interventions and new welfare state	mandatory
	PhD in social and behavioural sciences	voluntary
	PhD in inequalities, interventions and new welfare state	mandatory

Note: *social sciences taught from autumn 2023 onwards

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