

Higher Education Teaching in Social Policy in Finland

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AT A GLANCE

- Many consider Finland a role model for high-quality teaching.
 - Finnish higher education increasingly uses market mechanisms, which pressure universities to prove social impact.
 - Social policy teaching only takes place at universities and not at universities of applied sciences
 - It increasingly takes place within degree programmes that do not have the words “social policy” in the title. Instead, their titles name social phenomena.
 - Social policy alumni compete with other social scientists on the labour market, benefitting from their skills instead of their specific degree.
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BACKGROUND

Social policy teaching has become more important as new social challenges emerge, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To counter these challenges, societies need well-rounded social policy experts. Higher education institutions can train such experts. Insight from Finland is particularly interesting because many look to this country for inspiration on teaching and learning.

Higher education teaching in Finland recently underwent fundamental reforms. The Universities Act of 2009 separated universities from the state, making them independent legal entities. University employees were no longer civil servants. From this point on, universities received funding from

the government based on their performance, and funding through grants, tuition fees, and private sources became more important. Some argue that these changes strengthened market mechanisms in higher education and let the economy and labour markets steer activities in higher education (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014;¹ Ursin, 2019²). Like all other social sciences disciplines in Finland, social policy faces mounting pressure to create social impact and to commercialise its research results. Additionally, social policy becomes less visible as teaching programmes are increasingly structured around problems instead of disciplines.

SOCIAL POLICY PROGRAMMES

In the early 2020s, Finland had 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences, serving more than 310 000 students (Statistics Finland, 2023).³ Although Finland has a high number of higher education institutions, it has only six universities offering study programmes explicitly focussing on social policy (see the box below). All these universities offer study programmes in social policy at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level. Study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses are likewise rare in Finland: only two universities offered such programmes. The pickings were slim: only one university offered a programme 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 will launch new study programmes with a critical number of social policy courses in 2023 and 2024.

Finnish universities with study programmes for social policy

Universities with programmes on social policy

- Åbo Akademi University
- Tampere University
- University of Eastern Finland
- University of Helsinki
- University of Jyväskylä
- University of Turku

Universities with a critical number of social policy courses

- Åbo Akademi University
- Tampere University

The study programmes have a range of thematic orientations. All universities that provide study programmes in social policy offer

a bachelor's, a master's, and a doctoral programme in the social sciences. Social policy is a specialisation within these programmes. 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; the University of Turku offers a master's programme in inequalities, interventions, and new welfare state; and the University of Helsinki offers a master's programme in contemporary societies. 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. LUT University will offer a bachelor's programme on the social sciences and critical systems, such as energy, water, and technology from autumn 2023 on. The master's programme in the social sciences at LUT will start one year later, and it will probably have a similar focus.

LABOUR MARKET PROSPECTS OF SOCIAL POLICY GRADUATES

The study programmes in social policy and those with a critical number of social policy courses aim at a heterogenous job market. The career opportunity most commonly listed on the programmes' homepages are

research-related jobs, which five universities listed as ‘research’ and one as ‘data analyst’. Second most common are jobs requiring expertise, which three universities listed as ‘expert’, three named specific areas of expertise, and two named ‘consultant’ as a field of work. A third commonly named area is that of social tasks, with seven mentions covering various descriptions such as ‘social worker’, ‘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 specifically locate it within the public sector. The remaining mentions cover a wide area, ranging from ‘teacher’ via ‘entrepreneur’ to ‘journalist’. Social policy teachers and students agree that getting a degree in social policy provides individuals with useful skills that employers might value. However, social policy graduates compete on the labour market as social scientists – not specifically as social policy graduates.

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 by providing research-based teaching, requiring students to write a final thesis, and offering mandatory research methods courses. Research-based teaching is obligatory for all universities in Finland, being a requirement in the Finnish Universities Act. Writing a final thesis is not a legal requirement, but a common practice at Finnish universities. It is the final part of studies at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral level. This means that students gain get an introduction to research, and they conduct their own research, no matter what level they are at. In some programmes, they receive additional research

training through research methods courses. Research methods courses are mandatory in almost all programmes, with only five doctoral programmes making them optional. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- When policymakers introduce market mechanisms into higher education, they should consider the changes this brings to the contents of study programmes.
- If you are interested in social policy teaching in higher education, also look at study programmes that do not contain the words “social policy” in the title.
- The individuals planning study programmes in the social sciences should include some general skill courses, e.g., on management and computer use, to increase graduates’ chances on the labour market.
- Employers looking to hire social scientists, e.g. as data scientists or user experience analysts, could list social policy as a possible specialisation they are interested in. Employers looking to hire social scientists with research skills may consider individuals with a degree in social policy at the bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral level.

References

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2 Ursin, Jani (2019). Higher education reforms in Finland: From a ponderous to a more agile system? In Bruno Broucker, Kurt De Wit, Jef Verhoeven, & Liudvika Leišytė (eds.), *Higher education system reform: An international comparison after twenty years of Bologna* (pp. 67–77). Leiden: Brill Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004400115_005

3 Statistics Finland (2023). 11c3 -- Students and qualifications in education leading to a qualification (education code), 2004–2021. https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin__opiskt/statfin_opiskt_pxt_11c3.px/. Retrieved on: February 25, 2023.

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The authors bear full responsibility for the contents of the publication.

Imprint

DIFIS - German Institute for Interdisciplinary Social Policy Research
Director: Prof. Dr. Ute Klammer (University of Duisburg-Essen)
Executive Director: Prof. Dr. Frank Nullmeier (University of Bremen)
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Date and place of publication: September 2023, Duisburg/Bremen

Content oversight: Dr. Anna Hokema

Oversight of the publication series: Dr. Miruna Bacali

ISSN: 2748-680X