

Implementation of the Bologna Process in Finland and its Impact on Curricula Planning and Quality Assurance



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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the system of higher education in Finland, discusses some important issues related to the implementation of the Bologna Process in Finnish universities, and explores various tools used for quality assurance in curricula planning and development. As Finland traditionally enjoys top positions in various international rankings on education, the experience of this country should be given significant attention when planning and implementing reforms in countries that are still under the process of harmonizing their systems of education with European and international standards.

Key words: higher education, curriculum development, quality assurance, Bologna Process

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Introduction. The Bologna Process for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a political initiative within and beyond Europe to increase the compatibility of tertiary education, whose main action points include implementing the three-cycle system, enhancing mobility and recognition, promoting quality assurance, and increasing employability as well as strengthening the social dimension and enabling lifelong learning. Since its initialization in 1998, a total of 46 countries have joined the Bologna Process backed and enhanced by the European Union and its education policy as part of the Lisbon Strategy.

Inevitably, over the period of implementation both the Bologna Process itself and the concepts behind the EHEA have drawn as many supporters and enthusiasts as opponents and critics. Among the latter there have been some especially harsh in their accusations, who have claimed that «the Bologna Process under the guise of fancy words and elaborate phrases, is in reality a crude cost-cutting exercise that will lead to the ‘harmonization’ of Europe-wide higher education on a McDonaldization basis², to the destruction of individual university autonomy in the name of and while pursuing the Holy Grail of ‘standardization’ and ‘audit’/‘verification’³, to the creation of a ‘stifling top-down bureaucratic moribund EHEA»⁴.

² Ritzer, G. (2008) *The McDonaldization of society* 5. Pine Forge Press.

³ Power, M. (1997) Expertise and the construction of relevance: accountants and environmental audit. *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 22.2 (1997), pp. 123-146.

⁴ Palfreyman, David. «The legal impact of Bologna implementation: exploring criticisms and critiques of the Bologna Process.» *Education and the Law* 20.3 (2008), pp. 249-257.

However and, notably, the Nordic countries, which are traditionally considered to be especially strong in educational matters, used the Bologna Process to introduce some structural changes to their degree systems and to address some internal flaws, such as the length of study times, and have been much more tolerant in discussing the negative impacts on the quality of higher education¹.

The Bologna Process, which started in Finland in 2001 and was fully implemented by 2005, brought a number of structural changes to the organization of higher education with the reform of degree structures and, in the main, affected the number of teaching hours corresponding to one ECTS credit. The changeover to the new system was organized in accordance with quite an efficient model where special coordination projects were created in order to facilitate and harmonize the transition period across all universities in Finland.

The reform of degree structures also led to the revision of curricula in accordance with new standards and quality assurance policies. As Finnish universities enjoy a great deal of academic freedom in designing their curricula and organizing the teaching process, the changes made to curricula involved the contributions by university teaching staff and in most cases were agreed upon and approved at the departmental level. The quality assurance mechanisms, which include external and internal audits, various assessments, student evaluations and surveys are widely applied at Finnish universities and make sure the changes made to curricula are beneficial both for students and quality of degrees awarded.

Overview of Higher Education in Finland

The Finnish education system consists of pre-school education, basic education, general and vocational upper secondary education, and higher education. All education from pre-school to higher education is free. Education is compulsory for children reaching seven years of age and lasts for nine years. There is one optional year for those wishing to improve their grades. After compulsory education there is a choice between general upper secondary education aimed at providing students with competences needed to continue on to higher education and vocational upper secondary education leading to a vocational qualification.

¹ Välimaa, J., Hoffman, D. and Huusko, M. (2006). Bologna Process in Finland: Perspectives from the Basic Units. In Tomusk, V. (Ed.) *Creating the European Area of Higher Education: Voices from the Periphery*. Dordrecht, Springer, pp. 43-67. AND Saarinen, T. (2005) 'Quality' in the Bologna Process: from 'competitive edge' to quality assurance techniques. *European journal of education* 40.2, pp. 189-204.

The Finnish higher education system was quite recently reformed: before 2010 there were 21 research universities and 28 universities of applied sciences (UAS). UAS were previously known as polytechnics but their structure was reformed in the period from 1991 to 2000. By the beginning of 2010 a number of mergers between universities had taken place and in accordance with the new Universities Act all Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) were given independent legal status either as public corporations (14 universities) or as foundations under private law (two universities)². As a result of mergers, Finland has three new universities: Aalto University, University of Eastern Finland and (the new) University of Turku.

As stated in the Universities Act of Finland, research is one of the three main functions of universities together with education and societal impact. Finnish universities are responsible for a significant proportion of all research conducted in Finland. The education offered at UAS is, on the other hand, based on the requirements of working life with the aim of preparing graduates for professional expert assignments. It is worth mentioning that the number of applicants to universities and UAS is pretty equal.

In Finland, schooling, including tertiary education, is free for all Finnish and EU nationals. The State remains the main funder of universities in Finland but, under the new legislation, universities gain greater autonomy in terms of finances and overall management. The governance and decision making processes is also reformed, with more 'external members' on the board, including the chair. In addition, the rector is no longer elected by and from inside the university community, but recruited by the board. Universities have also taken the place of the State as official 'employers', and university staff no longer have the status of civil servants.

According to a report released by OECD in 2013, Finland enjoys one of the highest levels of educational attainment among all OECD countries: as shown in Table 1, 39% hold a tertiary degree (against the OECD average of 32%).

In comparison with other OECD countries, Finland spends a larger amount of public resources on tertiary education: see Table 1. The private share of total expenditure on tertiary institutions, as paid by individuals, businesses and other private sources, including subsidized private payments, is comparatively low: 4.1% compared with the OECD average of 32%.

² Universities Act. Finland (2009) Retrieved from: — <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2009/en20090558.pdf>

Table 1
COMPARISON OF SELECTED INDICATORS OF FINLAND TO OECD AND EU21

Indicator	Finland		OECD average		EU21 average		Finland rank among OECD countries and G20 countries
	2011	2000	2011	2000	2011	2000	
Entry rates into tertiary education (university programmes)	65%	71%	60%	48%	59%	46%	13 of 36
Graduation rates in tertiary education	47%	40%	39%	28%	41%	27%	5 of 26
Annual expenditure per student, USD, in 2010	16714 USD		13528 USD		12856 USD		8 of 33
Total expenditure on educational institutions as a share of GDP	6.5%	5.6%	6.3%	5.4%	5.9%	5.2%	11 of 33

Source: compiled by author on the basis (Education at a glance: Finland (2013)).

The same report states that despite registering the eighth largest drop in GDP among OECD countries between 2008 and 2010, the country is maintaining its efforts to provide sufficient funds for education. In fact, Finland increased spending on education in absolute terms at all levels by 6% between 2008 and 2010. Likewise, in 2011 levels of expenditure in education relative to GDP (6.5%) were above the OECD average (6.3%), reflecting a real effort by the government to maintain provision for its educational system and continue investing in education despite the global recession.

The Bologna Process and curriculum reform in Finland

As part of the European-wide Bologna Process, Finnish University degrees were reformed in the autumn of 2005¹. In addition to improving the general quality and international comparability of qualifications, another important aim in Finland was to shorten study times. The main purpose of the Bologna reform was not structural but consisted mainly in renewing degrees so that they could better meet the demands of research and working life. The process began in Finland in 2002 when the Ministry of Education published a memorandum discussing the implementation of the two-cycle degree structure.

To coordinate the Bologna reform, in 2003 the Ministry of Education established a total of 22 field-specific national university projects

and named a coordinator for each project. The Ministry of Education also financed the projects. The project groups consisted of members from several universities together with student representatives. By giving the responsibility for the practical reforms to the universities themselves, the Ministry of Education could focus on updating the legislation.

Basically, reform consisted of introducing the two-cycle degree structure and the ECTS system. The first cycle university degree was already in use prior to August 2005, but in practice it played a minor role. Since August 2005, the Bachelor's Degree has become an obligatory requirement for proceeding to the Master's level. Previously, study attainments were measured in study weeks, which corresponded to 40 hours of study time whereas current ECTS credit corresponds to 26 hours of study time. As the previous Finnish system was fairly similar to ECTS, the change was not as dramatic as in some other countries. Moreover, ECTS credits had been used in student exchanges since the 1980s.

As already mentioned above, one of the purposes of degree reform was to renew the content of degrees. In Finland, as the division into first and second cycle degrees was already present – although not actively employed – and the change from study weeks to study points was a mechanical one, the emphasis was put on changing the curricula to more student-centered ones. Instead of focusing on the courses required for completing a degree, the emphasis was to be on the skills and competences students should gain during their studies. The internal aspects of the process were the analysis of core content and

¹ Reform of university degrees (2005) Retrieved from: www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Koulutus/artikkelit/yliopistojen_tutkinnonuudistus/liitteet/tutkinnonuudistus_en.pdf

student workload. To define the core content of the curriculum, a Core Content Divider method was widely used in Finnish higher education institutions¹.

This tool gives heuristic help for classifying curriculum contents in relation to three categories: essential knowledge, supplementary knowledge and specialized knowledge. Essential knowledge is knowledge that all students must possess and which is a necessity for further studies. Supplementary knowledge is, in turn, something that students should know, but it is not compulsory. Specialized knowledge includes specific details which are good to know but not necessary for proceeding with studies. This division into the three types of knowledge was taken into account when determining student workload and the number of hours needed for completing each course.

In addition to analyzing the core content of the curriculum and reforming the curriculum structure, other changes also took place on August 1, 2005. Personal Study Plans, the purpose of which is to ease student counselling and study progress, became obligatory for all new students. In addition, the grading system changed from the previously used 1–3 to the current 1–5 scale. In many universities, the academic year is now divided into four periods instead of the former model of an autumn and a spring term.

Bologna Reform in Humanities

The fact that the previous specific decrees on degrees in each field of study have been replaced in the Bologna Process by one common decree that now included university degrees in every field triggered a significant change in the Finnish higher education system. The new Government Decree on University Degrees applies to students of the Humanities, the Natural Sciences, Medicine, the Technical Sciences as well as those in art academies². As the practices in a certain field of study must be similar throughout the country, it was necessary to agree at national level on several matters related to the degrees in each field. For this purpose, the Ministry of Education created several national field-of-study-specific coordination projects. Some of the projects were very wide-ranging, for example, in the Humanities

and Natural Sciences, and others were narrower, such as in Social Work and Pharmacology. The Ministry of Education also allocated appropriate funding for the projects.

The coordinators had freedom and independence in organizing their own projects. The task forces formed for the projects were thus assembled according to very different principles: they were of different size, and the operating models of the projects differed from each other. Even the objectives set by the groups themselves could be different, with the exception that they must attend to the basic structure of the degrees.

The situation in Finland was different from that in many other European countries, since it was already familiar with the two-cycle structure and ECTS credits. In fact, Finland adopted the two-cycle structure on August 1, 2005, exactly 50 years after the first two-tier system took effect in 1955. Since then, Finland had mainly applied a one-tier model the aim of which was to pursue the Master's degree directly, and a voluntary two-cycle structure. Finland had also used the Finnish credit unit (an input of 40 hours of work per credit by the student) for over 25 years. Since it was considered impossible to make general recommendations without being familiar with the everyday work of the universities, the task force of the Humanities was formed of members with expertise which was as varied as possible. There are eight Faculties of Humanities in Finland, and the Faculty of Arts and Design in the University of Lapland also partly belongs to the same field of study. The members of the task force represented not only one university each, but also different disciplines and different post categories. There were two student members in the group from the National Union of Students in Finland, since it was considered important that the students' point of view be widely heard. The group was small enough to function well as a team but large enough to guarantee communication and feedback from different stakeholders in the Humanities. Depending on the subject, the group invited additional experts to their meetings.

As the Humanities is a very broad and multiform field of study, the task force had not itself tried, for example, to perform a core content analysis for each subject. However, the principles and practices to be used in such an analysis had been discussed in the group. The planning of content had been and still is carried out in the faculties, departments and branch-of-science-specific national networks, whose work had been supported by the task force with its recommendations on the general degree structure and the ways to pursue the degrees. Structural similarity does not require similarity of content, and

¹ Karjalainen, A. (2007) Four perspectives for designing joint programmes in higher education. Developing Joint Programmes and Degrees in the Nordic and Baltic Countries, Tampere 12–13th December 2007. Retrieved from: www.uta.fi/~kk55966/Karjalainen_1312.pps. AND Karjalainen, A., Alha, K., Jutila, S. (2006) Give Me Time to Think: Determining Student Workload in Higher Education. Retrieved from: www.oulu.fi/w5w/tyoka-lut/GET2.pdf.

² Government Decree on University Degrees. Finland (2004) Retrieved from: <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaanomokset/2004>.

thus, the task force has encouraged the disciplines to profile themselves, especially concerning the contents of the Master's degree. The core content of the Bachelor's degree had to be rather similar in the studies of the same discipline.

The project group for the Humanities also cooperated with project groups in other fields of study. It had been of great importance to ensure common principles with the most important *interdisciplinary partners*. That is, in those fields where studies are often combined in the same degree. Usually, humanities subjects are combined with subjects in the social sciences or education (in Finland subject teachers pursue their Master's degree in the so-called subject faculties, such as the Faculty of Humanities or the Faculty of Science, but carry out their one-year pedagogical studies in the Faculty of Education). The results of the cooperation with the social science and education project groups could benefit many future generations of students.

Cooperation with the deans of the Faculties of Humanities and with the administration of student services had also been important. The work of the group had also had an international dimension via the Finnish participation in the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe Project¹ as well as joint projects and cooperation with the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Tartu.

Curriculum development in Finnish HEIs

Curriculum development is undoubtedly one of the most central aspects of quality assurance in higher education institutions. One of the most important concepts in curriculum planning is learning outcomes, which have been defined as «statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning»². Learning outcomes, as a benchmark for assuring quality and efficiency in higher education, enable universities to express student achievement beyond the boundaries of subject knowledge and to foster other important skills that are developed during the educational process. Theory review goes back to the fundamentals of outcomes-based curricula by Benjamin Bloom³, with coverage of more recent contributions⁴.

¹ <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu>.

² A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (2005) Retrieved from: www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs.

³ Bloom, B. (1956) *A Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives*. New York: McKay.

⁴ Coates, M (2000) *Compliance or Creativity?: Using Learning Outcomes to enhance learner autonomy*. Academic Development – Challenges and Changes International Conference, South Africa: Rhodes University, December. and Anderson, L. W. and Krathwohl, D. R. (eds.) (2001) *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman.

In the report of the committee for the development of university degree structure with Ministry of Education of Finland, a university curriculum is defined as *a tool for planning teaching and studies*. The report lists some important qualities of the curriculum: with the help of the curriculum studies can be structured into a solid entity. The curriculum lists the courses and study modules together with their learning objectives and expected outcomes. The extent of studies and their core contents are also defined. The connections and the succession of courses are built according to the principles of cumulative learning. The curriculum describes the teaching and evaluation methods. It also describes the student's study path and enables unrestrained advancement of studies. A well-structured curriculum makes it possible to anticipate hindrances in study progress and helps in preparing a personal study plan⁵.

Moreover, the state supports harmonious curriculum reform by setting a National Framework of Curriculum Standards and ensuring continuous revision of a curriculum with inputs from all stakeholders.

To help the reform of the degree structure, the Ministry of Education financed a three-year (2004-2006) project called W5W – «Five Years, two degrees». The project was coordinated by the University of Oulu and the University of Kuopio, and a total of 12 Finnish universities participated. The W5W project had four sub-themes: the development of the academic curriculum, implementing personal study plans, developing more versatile methods for study counselling, and supporting the formation of guidance practices for supplementary studies during the transition period from the old degree structure. During the project, materials were published both in Finnish and English. A continuation project called W5W2 (2007-2009), coordinated by the same universities, supported the implementation of the Bologna Process in Finnish universities⁶.

Applying the concept of learning outcomes as central to the review of curriculum has helped most Finnish HEIs make changes to the content of the courses without compromising their quality. Moreover, Finnish education policies intended to raise student achievement have strong emphasis on teaching and learning, intelligent accountability, creating optimal learning environments and implementing educational content that best helps their students reach the broader and more specific aims of earning a degree.

⁵ Quality Handbook of Higher education in Finland and Russia (2009) University of Turku.

⁶ W5W Project website. www.w5w.fi

It is important to understand that Finnish universities enjoy extensive autonomy in curriculum development¹. Individual universities are free to develop curricula on the basis of the national degree structure in compliance with the Decree on University Degrees. Inevitably it leads to considerable differences between curricula in the same field in different universities, which may result in additional work when switching from one university to another. The Bologna Process urged Finnish universities to reconsider this approach.

Depending on the administrative practices at different universities, curricula are revised at varying intervals, and their revision is organized in diverse ways. There are two separate cycles in the curriculum development process: an annual cycle and a longer one. The annual preparation is based on updating the curriculum from the previous year and in practice no structural changes can be made. Structural changes are made when scientific or societal needs require them. For example, in Finland the reform of the degree structure in 2005 was such a reason.

Most often the curriculum is revised annually and the schedule is, to a large extent, dependent on the publishing date of the study guide that lists the descriptions of all courses offered by a particular HEI. Curricula are often planned and confirmed in different bodies; the preparation work may be done informally, but the decision is taken in an official body. In an ideal situation, the curriculum development process is a genuine joint undertaking between students, teachers, administrative personnel and interest groups outside the university.

When considering the curriculum development process from the perspective of quality assurance, it is essential to find out who takes part in preparing the curriculum, what is their status in the unit's organization and in the field of science. In most units, the annual preparation involves staff meetings, the purpose of which is to reach the whole staff of the department. In practice, the possibility to influence decisions in these kinds of meetings depends on the individual's academic status. Thus, larger meetings are best suited for polishing plans, not making them. The actual preparation process usually takes place either informally or as individual work. Thus, when building the internal quality assurance systems, universities should make sure that curriculum revision processes are clear and transparent to both staff and students.

Curriculum information may have several users if care has been taken that the information is easily available. Users may include those involved in curriculum design, teaching staff, current and prospective students, administration, researchers, the public, and those involved in external quality assurance. And so it is important to pay attention to how the curriculum is communicated. Most study guides, which are typical sources of curriculum information, contain a lot of information on teaching and studying in addition to the actual curriculum. In fact, they could be described as quality manuals of teaching activities. On the other hand, study guides can take different forms. For example, departments may publish their own more detailed leaflets in addition to the study guide at faculty or institutional level.

In most cases, slight alterations can be made to the written curriculum without having to go through the entire curriculum approval process. For example, course literature or teaching methods can be changed either at the decision of the individual teacher or head of department. There have usually not been written regulations on these changes, but deviating from the written curriculum is a rather vague area where practices vary. To ensure the quality assurance of teaching, it would be important to define what kind of changes can be made to the curriculum, by whom and how the parties involved are informed of the changes. These kinds of rules have not necessarily been formulated, because in most units the current curriculum processes have evolved gradually, and there have not been any systematic approaches to developing curriculum planning. Some details of the preparation process have been developed and unnecessary elements have been deleted over the years. However, with the introduction of quality assurance systems and the overall description of different processes, these processes have also become more transparent.

Evaluation and quality assurance at the University of Turku, Finland

In accordance with the Universities Act of Finland², HEIs are responsible for the quality and continuous development of their education and other operations. Legislation also requires them to perform external evaluations of their operations and quality assurance systems on a regular basis and to publish the results of such evaluations. Institutions decide on their own quality assurance systems, and the

¹ Luoto, L. & Lappalainen, M. 2006. Opetussuunnitelmaprosessit yliopistoissa (2006) [Curriculum processes at universities. Abstract in English.] – Retrieved from: www.kka.fi/files/146/KKA_1006.pdf.

² Universities Act. Finland (2009) Retrieved from: <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2009/en20090558.pdf>

comprehensiveness, functioning and effectiveness of the systems are evaluated in audits¹.

According to the University Strategy of the University of Turku², the second largest public University in Finland, the quality assurance covering all its activities is a part of its normal operation. A quality assurance policy is created for the University, and the University's leadership ensures that quality targets are set at different levels of the organization. The University monitors and analyses its activities by, for example, internal and external audits, and develops its activities to secure the implementation of the strategy.

The Rector is responsible for the organization of the Quality System at the University as a whole, and the Heads of Units are responsible for quality assurance within their respective unit. However, the quality of the University's activities is fundamentally the result of the expert, responsible and ethical work of the members of the University community.

The aim of quality assurance at the University of Turku is to:

- support and ensure the implementation of the objectives and vision defined in the University's strategy;
- manage the work on the basis of sufficiently exact and updated monitoring and evaluation information;
- develop the quality of the University's working processes and enable the academic staff to focus on their basic duties;
- make the central principles and high quality of the University's work visible.

At the Faculties of the University of Turku, quality assurance work is led by the Dean and in the Departments by the Head of Department. There are also Quality Contact Persons, as appointed by the Faculty, who are in charge of the practical implementation of quality assurance.

Assessments and peer review have a long tradition of being included in the work of the scientific community. Research, teaching and learning are assessed using many different criteria.

As stated in the University Strategy of the University of Turku, the expertise of its personnel is the key factor in the University's success. The personnel are encouraged to maintain and develop their own professional skills and to take initiatives to develop them. As stated in the University Strategy, development discussions are established

as part of the community's activities, and they are used to support the management of units and the work, development and career advancement of staff.

Employee development is an administrative personnel support service, which offers the staff of the university the possibility to develop professionally and supports the individuals at the university in work community related improvement. The goal of this operation is to develop the intellect, skills and attitude of personnel, so they can help the staff, so that it can keep up with the current times as well as developments in the changing future.

Needs regarding the methods and contents for the development of the university personnel are assessed, and the possibilities of the university personnel's development are diversified on the basis of assessments, taking into account, e.g. increasing internationalization. Employee development is split into two sections at the university: general employee development and educational development. Within the framework of personnel development activities, both university-level education and unit-specific development projects are organized.

The Special unit for Education Development organizes and coordinates the development of best practices in teaching. Its main role is seen as:

- to organize pedagogical training for university staff;
- to coordinate and train the university's network for study counseling;
- to act as an expert on issues related to education within the university's quality assurance work; and
- to offer pedagogical and technical support for projects within the virtual university and other uses of teaching technology, using the university's network for teaching development.

Development of teaching faculty's and other employees' competences is regarded as a central factor for the maintenance of well-being at work in the university. The university's Staff Administration prepares suggestions for training and development courses that the university offers each spring and autumn semester. The preparation is supported by the University's Committee for Employee development, which defines the annual staff competence needs, further staff development methods and discusses principles for employee development³.

By way of **conclusion**, it should be noted that the Bologna Process has probably been one of

¹ Talvinen, K. (2012) Enhancing Quality. Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council.

² University of Turku. Strategy and Values. 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.utu.fi/en/university/strategy-and-values/Documents/UTU_strategy_2013-2016_final.pdf.

³ University of Turku Regulation on Education and Degrees (2012) Retrieved from: <http://www.utu.fi/en/research/utugs/Documents/RegulationStudies2012.pdf>

the most notable recent triggers of change in global education and some countries have been especially successful in using this challenge as an opportunity for positive transformations and growth. *The Finnish case can be seen as a good example of reforming the degree structure, implementing the new system and adjusting curricula to the new regulations without compromising their content and overall quality.* All this gives grounds to say that Finnish universities benefit both from the country's long-standing traditions in education and pan-European reforms, which ensure sustainable curricular changes and the high quality of awarded degrees.

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