



National Report/ Dialogue/Access and progression group

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Access - how adults find their way to the university in Finland, and research

Reflective summary

The access in to the Finnish universities differs a lot from the situation in many other countries. Strong numerous clausus with entrance exams restricts the amount of new students in every University. In the universities there are not really educational programmes for adults in the sense that the programmes are planned for part time studies and made available for adults through some kind of alternative routes. The only real adult route into the university is the so called open university channel. In this report it is described and explained. The significance of this open university channel is not very big, because it is open only in some subjects. This channel and the students who use it, is researched quite well. There are also some research done on entrance exams and how they work. The biggest research tradition in Finland concerns however the effect of social background in the selection process. This tradition goes back to 70's. The effect of social background in the universities selection processes is an important political question. Ministry of Education and Culture is starting a programme to diminish these effects. The situation is different in the universities of applied sciences, because they have specially planned educational programmes for adults.

Background

In Finland the access of adults into university has not been a big issue. Universities are traditionally seen as educational institutes for young people. After the massification of universities during the 60's and 70's the average age of university students is now higher, but studying at university has not changed much and is in most cases planned for young full-time students. There are not any educational programmes (degree programmes) especially planned for adults in Finnish universities¹ (the exception are universities of applied sciences) and financial aid for students does not recognise part time studying as a category. Although many university students actually are adults, living in different places and working along studying, it is strange how insufficiently this situation is taken into account for instance as flexibility of studies.

Finnish students are comparatively old when they enter the university and they also study for a comparatively long time. According to the OECD report Education at a Glance (9. 9.2008) gaining

¹ Nursery and health studies are perhaps one exception. But the prerequisite for applicants is Bachelor's Degree accomplished in nursery or health sciences at the University of Applied Sciences or college-level training in health care.

entrance to universities in Finland (including Universities of Applied Sciences) is not easy at all and the students are quite old when they enter the university. Of 19-year-old Finnish young people only one fifth is studying in a university, whereas the figures in USA, Canada and Belgium are already almost half. Political discussion of access into university in Finland is now concentrated on young students. Behind “earlier into university” -thinking is the economical fact that after the university studies the working time of each individual before retirement is too short. The recent plans are that the younger students must have some kind of priority in getting into university. It has proved to be a difficult practical and legal issue because of equality reasons. At the same time discussion about the possibilities of adults to get into university hardly exists.

Equality policy in Finland puts everybody in the same situation: to get into university you have to go through the main selection process with entrance exams and compete for your study place (numerus clausus). The only exception is separate selections, which have their own rules varying between universities. One part of these separate selections is the so called open university channel. If we look at this system from the point of view of an adult, the only route which takes into account an adult’s situation is the open university channel. It is the only quota of separate quotas, which is directed for adults (Rinne et al. 45). But only a minority of students has the possibility to use the open university channel which is available only in some majors. In the year 2000 only 1,6% (320 students) of all the new students used this route into university and 2006 3,3% (665 students) (Rinne et al. 2008,45).

Numerus clausus

In Finland numerus clausus is the main method for limiting the number of students who may study at the university. It is used in all fields of study in the Finnish universities. Universities are free to define their own criteria for the admission of students. This limitation is based on the entrance exam or the entrance exam and the matriculation examination together. In some subjects it is possible for a certain amount of applicants to get a place at the university solely on the basis of the result of matriculation exam (e.g. mathematics). In some cases applicants can get some benefit from work experience etc. In most cases these exams are organised by the educational programmes (or major subjects), and they consist of exams which are based mainly on textbooks (they measure for instance the ability to write an essay based on these books). In some cases, such as teacher training programmes, personal interviews and a test for classroom skills will be organised. Especially the art universities use different kind of suitability tests. As an exception to this decentralised system of entry, there can be joint entrance examination for instance in natural sciences and engineering. One special trait of the Finnish system is that the students are selected directly to educational programmes which lead to the master’s degree, so they have from the first beginning the right to study master’s degree. Perhaps in the future there will be more and more special selection processes also after bachelor’s degree.

Numerus clausus has caused the formation of a reservoir of applicants who try to get into university several times and these older students compete with the students who have recently done their matriculation exam. This queuing for university entry is also called “matriculation backlog” (OECD 2009, 21). The median age of students has risen from about 22 years (1967) to 26 (2004). The age structure varies between faculties and majors. For example in the University of Eastern Finland in adult education 70% and administrative law 60% of students are over 30 years old. Of course there are several reasons behind this adultification of the universities and it does not depend only on the age of new students.

There has been lively discussion in recent years about changing this system so that part of the available student places should be reserved to new students (just matriculated). This discussion is mainly based on the argument that we have to lengthen our work careers in order to survive in the future. Finnish students are comparatively old when they graduate. According to the plan of Education and research 2011-2016 (Development plan Ministry of Education and Culture) the renewal of the selection process of higher education institutes has been started. The aim is to speed up the process of students coming to higher education institutes. In the plan of the ministry it is said: “The ministry aims to improve the position of those who seek their first study place in HEIs. In the first phase this will be done by selecting them in their own quota. HEIs can decide how they implement this quota; they can decide when they implement it and how big this quota is. In the second phase this selection process will be renewed so that in the National Common Selection process (yhteisvalinta) there will be only those who seek their first study place in HEIs. Special application routes and selection procedures will be produced to other applicants so that a possibility to change the specialisation options flexibly is secured.” This discussion is still going on and the Ministry of Education and Culture has just got the statements of the Universities regarding the latest proposition.

As stated earlier, the Finnish system does not separate part time students or adult students into their own categories. The main route to become a university degree student for an adult is the normal main selection (exam way). The good feature of the numerus clausus -system with exams is that it gives a second chance to those who have not succeeded in the matriculation exam nor have other educational background such as a vocational diploma.

The social inequality of university studies

It is quite difficult to get into university. Because of the numerus clausus 4 of 5 applicants cannot get a place in university. The Finnish University education is an attractive option: there is no tuition fee and the economic support for students is generous (as the report of OECD 2009,22 says). In spite of these economical facts and educational policy, which has aimed at equality, it has not been able to remove the inequality of the educational opportunities, because inequality lies in the basic structures of the society. (Rinne et al. 2008,27,28) Kivinen & Rinne (1995) have stated that in the

beginning of 90's if a person's father had academic education his/her probability to study at university was 11 times higher than that of the descendant of a less educated father. If one's father had a polytechnics degree, the probability was 7-8 times higher. The same tendency can be seen, when we look at the effects of the socio-economic status. The descendants of upper-level white collar (ylempi toimihenkilö) employees have 8 times higher probability than workers' descendants. The descendants of lower-level white collar employees (alempi toimihenkilö) have 2,5 times higher probability to study at the university. In the course of years this inequality has declined a little but the problem still exists. Measured by the socio-economic status, the most elitist universities in 1990 were Helsinki University of Technology and Helsinki School of Economics together with Sibelius Academy and Theatre Academy Helsinki. The most vernacular universities were Universities of Oulu, Lappeenranta and Jyväskylä. (Rinne et al. 2008, 29-31)

However, you have to keep in mind that the situation described above has improved a lot in two generations. "In Finland 48% of students in higher education had fathers who themselves also had a higher education qualification, while this was the case only for 28% of fathers of men in the same age group (Chart A7.2). (Education at a Glance 2007)

Finnish Government has decided to prepare a programme for educational equality. The aim of this programme is to substantially reduce the educational and skill differences between sexes, to reduce the effect of social background on the educational attainment and to develop the possibilities of the underrepresented groups. The programme deals with all levels of education. The aims, specifically in higher education, are to reduce by half the differences between sexes and regions and the effect of social and ethnic background. Sex and background as factors effecting the attainment of university education should be one of the smallest among OECD countries.

The programme will be ready in 2012 and the aims should be reached by 2020 and 2025. (Education and research 2011-2016)

Adult's² routes to the university

An accepted objective in the Finnish educational policy has been to increase the amount of university degrees accomplished by adults (Koulutuksen ja tutkimuksen kehittämissuunnitelma 2003-2008). At the same time it has been stated that there are no routes to this. OECD (Thematic Review, Country note, 51) recommends: "Access to higher education, especially universities, should be opened to a wider public, including adults with work experience, to prepare the modern workforce. A standardised national university exam would probably help a great deal in tackling the problems by enhancing the number of university entrants, getting students to finish their studies more quickly and helping to leave the open university available to those who need it the most."

² Adult is defined here as an over 25 year-old person.

The overall fact is that the older the applicant the more difficult it is to get into university. In the main selection every fifth applicant under 20 gets a university place. Only 15% of the applicants over 30 get a university place. (Rinne et al. 2008, 68-70)

It has to be taken into account that at the time of this study in 2003 (Rinne et al. 2008,86-90) there were four different routes to university studies: main selection, open university channel, so-called retraining and upgrading of qualifications and other routes (such as separate selections 4000 students). The so-called retraining and upgrading of qualifications route has narrowed in recent years. According to the study of Rinne et al. (2008) the percentages of different routes were: the main selection 83,9%, open university channel 2,4%, retraining and upgrading of qualifications 5,2% and other routes 8,5%. If you look at the percentage of accepted adults in these groups, it was 55,2% accepted in main selection, 6,2% in open university, in selection retraining and upgrading of qualifications 15,5% and in other 23,2%.

Main selection (entrance exams) is the main route into university also for adult students. According to the study (Rinne et al. 2008) the adult-friendliness of the universities varies a lot. It varies also according to the subject. E.g., in the University of Kuopio 36% of all applicants in the main selection were adults and adults constituted 37% of all accepted students. This means that 33,3 % of adult applicants were accepted and 34,1% of all applicants were accepted. In the other end is for instance Helsinki University of Technology where only 9% were adult applicants and 6,3% of them were accepted. Of all the applicants 18,1 % were accepted, but only 11,5% of adult applicants. (Rinne et al. 2008,95)

If you look at the subjects (major) the adult-friendliness varies also a lot. The biggest amount of adult applicants and approved ones were in nursery and health sciences, 73,2% of applicants were over 25 years old. The amount of adults of all the approved students was 80% and of the group of adults 27,8% were approved. Pharmacy and the educational sciences and theology were also very adult-friendly sciences. In all these sciences the acceptance percentage of adults was higher than average. In forestry, agriculture and humanistic sciences as well as in law the proportion of adults that get a university place is under the average. In mathematics and natural sciences, sport sciences, veterinary medicine, medicine, technical sciences and dentistry the amount of accepted adults is very low. (Rinne et al. 2008,94- 103)

Open university channel is one of the routes into university. In every university (except the Academy of Fine Arts) there is a so-called open university³. In 2009 over 72 000 students studied at the open universities. The participation in OU studies goes along the usual accumulative pattern: the more basic education the more OU study. A great majority, 76% of OU students are women. Open university studies are not free of charge. Since 2010 the student in OU has to pay 10€ per one ECTS; the fee was somewhat higher before that. This may slightly limit participation in OU studies. On the

³ Finnish universities organise Open University courses for all. Most universities have separate organisation inside the university to organise these services. Everybody can take part in OU studies regardless of age, educational aims or previous schooling.

other hand OU uses distance education, mixed mode courses, Web-based courses and has a wide regional network. These traits facilitate access.

The studies at the open university are in most cases equivalent to those at the university itself. In some cases in the main selection there has been some advantage of the credit points completed at the open university. It is also a route for younger people to get into university. 'The open university channel' means that on the basis of the studies completed at the open university it is possible in some cases to be accepted to the university without any entrance exam. Different subjects have made exact definitions on how much you have to study (in ECTS -credits and in the level of studies) to get into university without exam. For example at the University of Eastern Finland you can get to study computer science if you complete the basic studies (25 ECTS with good command). In education channel one has 20 places for those who have completed basic studies and intermediate studies (60 ECTS, good command) in education or adult education in OU and they also have to have basic studies in another subject (25 ECTS). These demands vary a lot, but in many cases the level is quite high (85 to 110 ECTS or even more). We have to keep in mind that these places for students, coming through open university channel, are often restricted.

Numerically, in 2003 695 students of the total of 1424 applicants moved on to the university through this channel. The universities of Joensuu and Jyväskylä accepted 100 students via this open university channel each. But at the Universities of Helsinki, Oulu, Turku and in Åbo Akademi this open university channel was very narrow. Helsinki as the largest university took only 82 students this way, which was 1,4% of the whole amount of the new students. For instance in Åbo Akademi only 0,7% of new students entered the university through the OU channel and in the Helsinki University of Technology only 0,1 %. In Joensuu and Kuopio⁴ the number of students who entered through open university channel was 5% of the total number of the new students in each university.

According to the study of Rinne et al. (2008, 68-69) it is a little easier for adults to get into university through this channel, especially for those who are over 40 years old. This varies between the age groups from 60% to 40% (percentage of acceptance). But one third of the users of the channel are under 25 years old and 50% of the applicants under 20 were accepted. Politically this route has caused discussions and resistance among student organisations. They have justified their opinion arguing that this is too easy way to get into university and the only equitable route is the main selection. Student organisations have had concerns also because open university channel is not totally free of charge. They are strictly supporting the possibility to study without tuition.

Separate selections or separate study rights are mainly for those who have already studied at the university and want to move to another university or are studying at another university and want to add to the degree some studies from another university. In some cases this can be true also for those who have studied at the University of Applied Sciences. Also those who want to change their major in the home university are taken in to account in separate selections. Open university channel

⁴ University of Joensuu and Kuopio have merged and form now University of Eastern Finland. Last year 2010 University of Eastern Finland took over 200 students via open university channel.



is also one selection process included in separate selections. In some cases, this kind of study right can be granted also for those who are in working life and want to enhance professional expertise.

Retraining and upgrading of qualifications is designed in response to the needs of society and based on previous academic studies and aims at a degree. Both of these last routes (if we do not take open university channel into account) are not really for those who are seeking the way to get into university and do not have previous academic studies or degrees.

Access and research

Although Finland is a small country, it has quite a remarkable research tradition concerning access to the university. The research has dealt especially with the effect of social background and its influence on the admission to the university. This tradition has its roots in the 70'ies (Antikainen 1974). This is still a living tradition and research has confirmed this fact also lately. For instance Nori (2011) examined the selection for admission to Finnish universities. Her conclusion of the student selection process was similar to other studies: "the offspring of the most educated and high social status parents gained a study place more often than other applicants". The new observation Nori (2011) found out was "the good success of the offspring of farmers. The applicants from farmer families had the greatest probability of gaining a study place." The group of researchers in the University of Turku has been active in research which deals with the admission into university and the education of adults (several studies: Rinne et al. 2008; Rinne, Heikkinen Salo 2007; Rinne, Kivinen ja Ahola 1992; Isoaho, Kivinen ja Rinne 1990; Kivinen ja Rinne 1995)

The group which has started their studies at the university as adults is researched by Moore (2000). According to her studies the background of these students is more often working class family, they come more often from countryside and they have not accomplished the matriculation examination.

This group is also more goal-oriented and motivated as average students in their studies and they want to accomplish their studies quickly. Other characteristics are: they interrupt studies more seldom, they do not change their study orientation so often and their studies proceed quicker than average. Partly this quicker progression is explained by former studies in open university. (Rinne et al. 2008, 35; Mäkinen 2001)

The university studies of adults are not very well researched. The research done by Erja Moore (2000 and 2003) are according Rinne et al (2008, 18) the only ones which more broadly explore the degree studies of adults. Open university channel has also been researched. Alho-Malmelin (2010) states that the open university channel has only a marginal role or value in the admission into university. Contrary to Rinne et al. (2008) she argues that the admission into university through open university channel favored older applicants – median age was 42. This research also stated the strengths of these adult students: well-developed study skills, independent attitude towards studying and attitudes which tried to figure the working life connections of studying.

Other studies on open university channel are: Rinne et al. 2008; Hyvärinen A-L. 2005. Hyvärinen 2006, Hurri 2003; Piesanen 2005; Väänänen, S. & Hynninen, O. 2005. Hyvärinen (2006) concentrates to study those who have been selected to the university via open university channel. According Hyvärinen (2006) those who find their way into the university through open university channel are older and more educated. More often they also do not have accomplished maturity examination and they are more often women and working people. Open university channel gives an opportunity to those people who do not want to take part in the main selection process and for those who do not want to commit to full time studies. Hyvärinen states also that it is not easy to move from open studies to full-time degree studies, which are planned for the young students. Hurri (2003, 65-73) has studied especially the transfer via open university channel to degree studies. For the majority the transfer to degree studies has been quite easy, but the adaptation to the university culture has been quite demanding and students have experienced lack of study guidance in the transfer phase. Piesanen (2005) thinks that alternative routes to university as an excellent educational policy and they add citizen's educational equality. Those students who come through open university channel have already accomplished big part of studies so they graduate more quickly. According the results of this empirical study these students are very motivated to study. They are also interested in scientific further studies, 58% has been thinking of studying after graduation.

In addition there are a lot of research and surveys and articles which deal with the selection process from many points of view such as how the selection process and achievement in selection is connected to the admission to the teacher education (Salminen & Paakkola 1979). There are also many development projects connected to the selection process as a whole but especially for teacher education (e.g. Valli, R. 2004). Valli has researched the selection process for teacher education. The case was retraining and upgrading of qualifications based education and Valli studies the effect of different aspects of the exam on the selection.

Research and dialogue

Finland is a very small country and research is often connected directly to practice. The people in the Ministry of Education and Culture are very well informed of the selection processes at the universities and the research on it, because they carry great political interest. They also use the researchers as experts in conferences and as advisors in the ministry. In the recent 10 years the admission into university has been one of the big issues as was mentioned earlier. Even public debate has taken place. Equality is one of the key values (ideals) of the Finnish society and the selectivity of admission procedures is followed carefully. This can be seen in the plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Ministry continuously updates the development plan now called Education and Research during 2011 -2016. This widely commented paper is approved by the government and it is the action plan for the ministry. In this plan the role of access is most crucial. I have cited above some of the actions planned by the new government concerning access to university. Public debate, the facts of researchers and discussions concerning the Education and research during 2011-2016 are good examples of the dialogue which concerns access into universities.

The development in renewing main selections of the Finnish universities causes some concerns. If young students will have some kind of advantage in the main selection process in future, it will immediately invoke the question how to develop and renew the structures and practices of separate selections and how to organise the position of adults in these selection processes. Modern society and universities need flexibility and adult population need not only so called second chance but many chances during their life-course. The studies mentioned above and an international study (Orr et al. 2011) refers to the fact "that alternative routes are opening higher education access for non-traditional students". Open university channel and other alternative routes (Orr et al. 28-35) can create more equality of educational opportunities. It would be a mistake to abandon the potentiality and experiences of adults.

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